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Fantasy AND Science Fiction

ALL BRITISH ISSUE

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Brian W. Aldiss
Robert Aickman
Richard Cowper
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Christopher Priest
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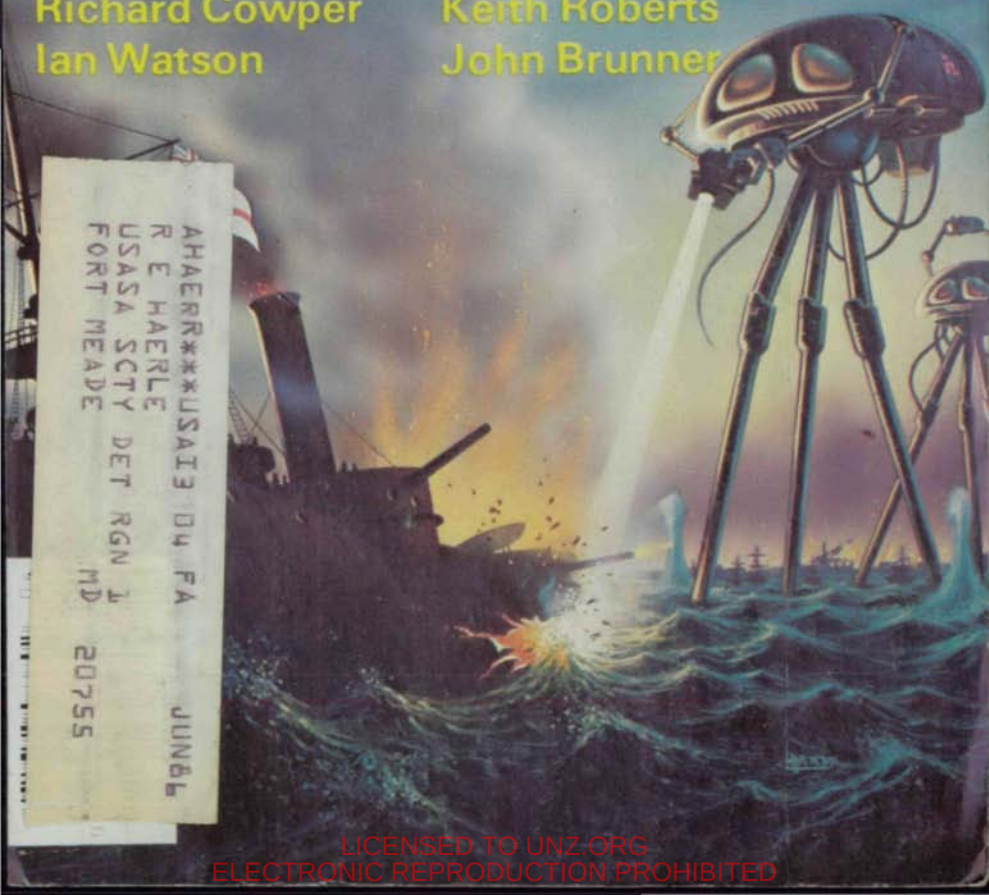

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Fantasy and Science Fiction

Including Venture Science Fiction

APRIL • 29th YEAR OF PUBLICATION

SPECIAL ALL BRITISH ISSUE

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This is perhaps the least contrived special issue we have ever published, which is another way of saying that the thing wasn't really planned. In fact, most of the stories were already in our files the day we ran our eye over the manuscript inventory and realized we had on hand at least an issue of extraordinary stories by a diverse group of British authors (ranging from old hands like Brian Aldiss and John Brunner to newer talents Christopher Priest and Ian Watson). The decision to publish them together was but another moment's work, and then all we needed was an article to tie the package together. For this we turned naturally to long-time F&SF contributor Brian Aldiss, who here clearly and concisely describes what is happening in contemporary British sf and how it differs from the American scene.

The Gulf And The Forest:

CONTEMPORARY SF IN BRITAIN

by BRIAN W. ALDISS

British sf has come a long way since *Beowulf*. Perhaps the first thing to be said about the British scene is that we have more science fiction writers than ever before. Many of them are independent-minded men who have taken the plunge and become full-time writers. Only when you write full-time can you sample to the dregs authorship's despairs, its isolation, its occasional keen joys. Only then are you dedicated. It is what is known in the vernacular as putting your balls on the chopping-block.

Let's name some of these independent writers. Recent declarations of independence have come from Ian Watson, Andrew Stephenson, Rob Holdstock, Chris Morgan, Mark Adlard, Bob Shaw, and Philip Dunn (who also runs a one-man publishing business). Of these writers, only Bob Shaw can be said to be established. All willingly embark on hazardous waters, as I remember doing twenty years ago.

Also independent are Richard Cowper, Edmund Cooper, Christopher Priest, Duncan Lunan, Lawrence James, Tanith Lee, Barrington Bayley, Michael Coney, D.J. Compton, Angus Wells, and M. John Harrison. Some of them are content to live on potatoes as long as they can write. Others are among the highest paid writers in the world, earning say 50,000£ a year.

Then there's an older age group which includes such stalwarts as Kenneth Bulmer, John Brunner, E.C. Tubb, John Christopher, Michael Moorcock, J.G. Ballard, and me. I'd better exclude Fred Hoyle, a fryer of other fish. I also exclude expatriates like Charles Platt, Bertram Chandler, and Arthur C. Clarke; and there are people whose reputation lies mainly in other fields of writing, like Angela Carter, Nigel Kneale, Peter Dickinson, Roald Dahl, and Terry Nation, creator

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of The Daleks. Excluding them, I've listed twenty-five people who live the lion's life of an author. That says a lot for the state of the art, and for our healthy independence of mind. No other country can claim as much.

We rely for our living on selling outside the British Isles. We rely on Australia, of course, where authors are now learning the hard way to become independent themselves, and where much excellent sf criticism is born. We rely on Scandinavia, on the continent of Europe, and particularly in France, where sf thrives as never before. On Japan. And on the United States of America.

You'll have to forgive me when I remind you that sf originated in Britain. (French, Germans, Hungarians and Russians mistakenly believe the same about their country.) But, no matter what country gave birth to the poor bastard child, the U.S. certainly became its orphanage.

The States has been so generous to sf that it thinks of it as its own child. Well, damn it, for a long while nobody else applied for adoption. The States provides the world's largest and most lucrative market for sf, a magnet for writers everywhere. So big a magnet that it has tempted many British writers to adopt a Yankee idiom and compete with the natives. Often with some success.

Until World War II, there was very little British sf, despite the fact that Wells and Stapledon and others were still alive. One reason for this, I believe, was that less gifted writers than Wells were tempted to try for publication in American magazines, where they were hospitably received.

After the war, things changed. Arthur Clarke wrote English stories. And so did John Wyndham. The vogue for Wyndham is past, I suppose, but his career remains significant. In the early thirties, he won a small prize in Gernsback's *Air Wonder Stories*, and after that appeared quite regularly in magazines like *Wonder* and *Amazing* under the name of John Beynon Harris. Following the war and a spell in the army, he had to start his career again. He adopted a markedly English style and English subjects. At once his first novel, *The Day of the Triffids*, was serialised in *Collier's* and published in Britain in hardcover, where it became an enduring best-seller. *The Kraken Wakes*, known in the States as *Out of the Deeps*, was almost as successful. For over a decade, Wyndham produced a novel every other year; some, like *The Chrysalids* (or *Rebirth*) were real beauties.

Wyndham's novels appeared in Penguin Books, then a British institution like the BBC. As a result, Penguin Books turned to science fiction. I'm by no means a mercenary man, but I must point out that Penguins immediately began to pay twice as much as any previous British paperback publisher. I know because I was the first editor of their sf series. I also edited three Penguin sf anthologies published in 1961, 1963 and 1964, which introduced many of my favourite American writers to an English public, where they have thrived since. (Those three volumes, now issued as an omnibus, have sold almost a quarter million copies and must represent the longest-lived of all sf anthologies.)

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Wyndham, that conservative man, was the true begetter of the New Wave. It was he more even than Clarke with interstellar subjects or Tolkien with his brand of ur-history, who proved to those who had forgotten their H.G. Wells that you could write ordinary local stories about time paradoxes or perambulating vegetables and hold an audience, without necessarily imitating Heinlein or van Vogt.

It must be hard for American connoisseurs of sf to comprehend the origins of the British New Wave. From where I stood at the time, I saw its first achievement was to chuck out from the two British magazines, *New Worlds* and *Science Fantasy,* the chaps who were filling them with American forgeries. That is to say, the British writers who tried for American markets and failed, selling instead to the cheaper British magazines. I was for chucking them out. Imitations are no good.

Since that palace revolution in the mid-sixties, British writers have contributed as never before to world sf. For us, that cleansing was an absolute necessity, just as it was necessary for John W. Campbell to chuck out the old guard when he assumed control of *Astounding*. Michael Moorcock was doing Campbell's work in a different context. Maybe we didn't like — or even understand — all we read in the new *New Worlds,* but by God we knew it had a creative impulse behind it. Those were fighting days.

The new fiction brought a more lively audience to sf which it has never lost. In place of the old suffocating atmosphere, breezes blew from outside. One practical result of this has been the re-introduction of science fiction as an ordinary part of the average reader's diet — part of the roughage along with Richard Adams or Margaret Drabble or Edna O'Brien. It has also meant that there are critics and editors and publishers with a sympathetic insight into science fiction. And they see it as a creative force, not just a marketable commodity.

A fanzine called *Cidereal Times* landed on my desk this morning. (Cider is a Somerset drink and this is a Somerset SF Society publication.) Michael Elvis writes in an editorial, "What I think is needed is a return to the New Wave of ten or so years ago, not necessarily in content or even in style, but in vitality, which is what SF seems to lack, today." It may sound like Chairman Mao's prescription for perpetual revolution, but discomfort is better than stagnation.

Perhaps I'm wrong in thinking that our revolution was widely misunderstood in the States just because a few established American writers spoke against it. It was anti-bunk, not anti-American. But a gulf opened then which is only just being bridged.

That gulf has helped us become independent, made us seek our own role. The same process takes place in every country; because it is always directed towards originality, against imitation, it deserves understanding rather than a load of bullshit about stamping it out. Just last year, I witnessed the attempt not to remain subservient to Anglo-American sf taking place in Italy and Denmark and Sweden. The hostility that was expressed towards our revolution has led some English writers to

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welcome the gulf, take less jam on their bread, and ignore the American market.

I prefer bridges to gulfs. Even if you have sentries at both ends of the bridge. My first novel, *Non-Stop* (*Starship* in the States, alas) was a dialogue with American premises; I still see the democratic ideal as enshrined in your country as of utmost value in our embattled world. My discourse is as much for the States as for the Europe to which I belong.

The gulf is also bridged by American writers who have derived encouragement from this side of the Atlantic. Early birds like Norman Spinrad (Hero of the Resistance, damned in the Houses of Parliament!), Thomas Disch, John Sladek, Stout Trooper Harry Harrison, and others arrived a while ago. Without leaving home, such writers as Philip K. Dick, Frederik Pohl, Robert Sheckley, and Ursula LeGuin have found, I believe, some temperamental affinity with England, as did the late James Blish. They have won large supportive audiences here.

So far, I have written on safe, non-controversial matters. Now I need to launch out more widely. Even in an age sprouting new media, literacy remains of paramount importance. No invention supercedes literacy — even totalitarianism. Perfection is achieved only on paper, and the written word is the means by which we perpetuate, not our species, but our civilization — without which our species is worth a questionable amount. Voyager spacecraft are a test of the reality of the alphabet.

Literature is always under threat, writers always under pressure, and so it should be. One element that menaces literature is Formula. Formula is the enemy within, the hardening of the arteries. In the present day, commercial fiction of most kinds relies on formula at all stages of production, whether it is Gothic, supernatural, tough tec, western, hospital romance, or whatever.

There is much to be said for formula. It makes the whole performance easier for writer, reader, and publisher. Formula fulfills expectations; if life proves disappointing, then we want to read that love and constancy win in the end, that the international communist dope-smuggler gets his come-uppance, that the corrupt city can be cleansed by one disillusioned hero. A world in which Superman breaks a leg falling downstairs or Maigret fails to solve his case is worse than silly, it's pointless. The whole point of formula is that it first teases and then satisfies expectations, one hundred per cent of the time. Anything else is bad business.

My faith in sf as a medium lies in the belief that it can never become entirely formularised, that by its nature it keeps breaking out of its shell, that it challenges us, enlarges us.

Yet now as never before sf is threatened by formula, simply because it is so commercially successful. Hence it is packaged on both sides of the Atlantic as formula writing, with formula covers and formula blurbs. It is easier to sell a novel if it runs to formula, easier still if it forms part of a formula series.

An example of sf formula: the galactic empire. Imperialism is a dead duck in the real world, an exhausted topic, a nineteenth century hangover,

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yet it still passes for live in many a ritualistic fantasy.

Edgar Rice Burroughs and E.E. Smith have much to answer for. Though you can't blame them for their imitators. They discovered and capitalised on certain formulas now widely used without thought. Formula, as I say, is not to be despised, in that it meets certain deeply felt requirements and allays anxiety by showing us that the world is what we expect. This is precisely the message sf should not deliver. Astonishment is everything. Literature is in any case not designed as a soporific; it should awaken us.

More to be blamed than Smith and Burroughs are the supercilious critics of literature. They have in the main resolutely turned their backs on sf, refusing to seek its virtues, thus discouraging those writers who strive to forge individual work: for those same writers less readily find the security offered by a mass audience, although they are the ones who in fact maintain forward momentum.

Sometimes, new prescriptions emerge. We leap to our feet cheering. It happened with Gernsback at first, with John Campbell at first, with the advent of *Galaxy*, with the advent of *F&SF*, and with Moorcock's *New Worlds*. Everything demands form if not formula. But vain repetition is the death of any literature. How many imitations of Doc Smith or Tolkien or *Dune* or Perry Rhodan have you seen and (I hope) passed by this year.

And this is where British writers are valuable to an American audience. I won't claim that we disdain formula — that would be daft. But we are conscious of being part of a literary tradition which is not outcast, and so we sometimes manage to write freshly; living outside your pressures, your society, but sharing your language, we can be relied upon for a different approach.

To this should be added a marginal thought. British sf writers are not segregated from other writers. We just form a healthy part of the cultural scene. Conversely, there are British writers like Anthony Burgess, Doris Lessing, Emma Tennant, Kingsley Amis, Martin Amis, Martin Bax, and others who sometimes write novels you might easily mistake for science fiction. Our publishers are not so obsessed with categories — and that goes for the writers too. Speaking personally, I prefer writing something out on a limb; the old sense of adventure retains muscle-tone that way.

So far, this article has dealt with differences between American and British sf. Those differences fade when we begin looking at what we have in common. I refer to the language itself — and here I draw on something I wrote for a British fanzine, *Maya*. We will talk not of gulfs but of forests.

We are accustomed to looking towards the future, but to assess the contribution Britain makes to science fiction, we must glance backward to periods long before sf existed.

The English language has been growing like a great forest for over a thousand years. The first leaves of that forest survive from the sixth century and are written in runes. Among those leaves are such poems as "Widsith,"

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"Beowulf," and "The Wanderer," which convey a kind of awe for the world and its strangeness which we can recognise as the spirit which, at least in part, informs contemporary science fiction.

As the forest has developed in response to changing conditions, so has the response to the wonderful, but that response is present in some of our greatest writers. The Langland of Piers Plowman, Chaucer, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Bunyan, Milton, Thomas Browne, Johnson, Pope, the Romantics such as Shelley and Byron, and the novelists and poets of last century — all in this long and illustrious line preserve a vision that escapes from the dull appearance of everyday. I do not know enough about other literatures to make useful comparisons; but a glance at Racine and Moliere as compared with, say, Shakespeare and Congreve is revealing. The unities of drama were certainly not invented in this country; here, joy is never at home.

This tremendous green bank balance of the imagination is something on which British science fiction writers draw. Our language is so much one of metaphor and metonym, of shifting light and shade, that we have only to say 'the dew is on the rose' to flood our minds with a host of associations about early mornings and English summers and so on — associations both vague and powerful.

The opening sentence of John Wyndham's *The Chrysalids* is this: "When I was quite small I would sometimes dream of a city." So powerful are the associations here that we are immediately prepared for a novel of visionary intensity. Yet, simplicity apart, there is nothing in the sentence which can be labelled as particularly Wyndham's — apart from the way in which the grand, fruitful traditions of the language are at Wyndham's and his reader's disposal.

Turn to the first novel in our language which is unmistakeably science fiction, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). We can see an imaginative tradition behind it, in particular the translation of the Bible, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Mary's father's novel, *Caleb Williams*. The text makes specific reference to *Paradise Lost*, just as Kingsley Amis's *The Alteration* scrupulously makes reference to Philip Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*.

After *Frankenstein*, it is easy to trace that imaginative tradition forward. H.G. Wells, an innovator of thematic material, belongs to the tradition which includes Defoe, Swift, and Mary Shelley. Olaf Stapledon apart, all British sf writers write within this tradition, however debased it may become in their particular case. Writers who show loving care for the language, like Ballard, Cowper, Masson and Moorcock, revivify the tradition without rebelling against it. In some of his most recent and best books, Moorcock exhibits remarkable synoptic grasp of the English past, its language, its tropes; I'm thinking in particular of *The Dancers at the End of Time* series.

In Shelley's time, technology had begun to advance with steadier tread. As C.S. Lewis put it, "The sciences long remained like a lion cub whose gambols delighted its master in private; it had not yet tasted man's blood." The

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Frankenstein theme of man's creation out of control is probably sf's major theme; it is a British coinage.

If one characteristic of our science fiction is to be singled out, it must be continuing scepticism; above all, scepticism about man's supremacy over nature and the benefits of unremitting technology. We have no writer of the standard of even, say, Larry Niven, who celebrates the extension of white technological power into the far future in a series of action-fantasies; true, there is always Arthur C. Clarke, but in Clarke's technological futures the human beings are generally rather passive or else are observers (as in *Rendezvous With Rama*), not superman of the van Vogtian mould.

We have bred no thorough-going technocrats such as Gernsback, E.E. Smith, Campbell, Asimov, or Heinlein. Ours is, on the whole, a technophobe culture. Technology means power, and the great bulk of magazine and paperback sf is power-fantasy, escapism with strong action heroes. Most fantasy can be written very fast — hence the productivity of sf's most characteristic exponents. It's the plot that matters, not refinements of character or reflections on life, which are a mainstay of real novels.

Preoccupations with power tend to exclude tender relationships between the sexes; so that such relationships in power-fantasy tend to the formulaic (boy gets girl in final paragraph) or censored out entirely. Away on alien planets or zooming in their spaceships, the tough guys are safe from female complications.

British sf, not having this preoccupation with power, is generally more liberal with sexual encounters. Incidentally, the New Wave was anti-technological and anti-power oriented, with a resulting powerful release of libido. Significantly, while the New Waves paid due tribute to their more illustrious hard sf predecessors, the technocrats could find no good in what was new: it had dirty words, guys did dirty things to girls, people went to bed instead of to Mars. The technocrats felt themselves threatened.

With scepticism goes another frequent English usage, irony. This quality one finds also in those American writers I mentioned earlier as bridging the gulf, Philip Dick, Ursula LeGuin, and Fred Pohl. Irony is rarely found in formula writing, for obvious reasons. Formula writing's basic function is reassurance, whereas irony works by questioning the reader's values.

Our best writers use sf to explore that irony formulated by Shelley long ago when he claimed that man, having enslaved the elements, remained himself a slave. This disturbing premise was also used by Wells, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien. Those names rank among the most honoured of science fiction writers anywhere in the world.

All of which suggests that British sf is simply, or not so simply, a branch of literature, and concerns itself with the perennial questions of good and evil within us, adapting this concern to the surrealist environments of change. Characteristically, landscape plays a large role in the genre. Disaster novels — an English specialty since Wynd-

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ham's day — are often exercises in landscape. Characteristically, the alien is absent from British sf.

It is American sf which confronts us with the alien personalised. There are probably historical reasons for this — white and black Americans being themselves aliens in a red land — but, whatever the reasons, the effect is generally to make us (the Earthmen) goodies and the intruders baddies. Much drama is to be had from confrontations, but it is surely more sophisticated as well as better theology to recognise evil within ourselves rather than as an external phenomenon. Pretending otherwise leads to the limp pastoral of *Startrek*, where half a dozen sexless saints go forth and improse American diplomacy on a naughty galaxy.

A matter-of-fact acknowledgment of evil and corruption, implicit alike from Wells's Dr. Moreau to Ballard's Dr. Nathan, leads to the often heard charge that British sf is 'too pessimistic.' If one wants optimism, one must turn, not to the States, but to the Soviet Union, where optimism is official. There you are required to be 'positive' about the soviet future or they take away your typewriter and give you a shovel instead.

Perhaps British science fiction is not ambitious enough. Yet I have just read five recent novels which are enjoyable, well-written, and generally enhance life. They are Christopher Priest's *The Space Machine*, Bob Shaw's *A Wreath of Stars*, Michael Moorcock's *The Hollow Lands*, Michael Coney's *Brontomek!*, and Kingsley Amis's alternative world, *The Alteration*. All have that modest British virtue of modesty, together with an enormous competence which, like a Harris tweed coat, stems in part from the traditions behind them. I cannot imagine that any other country will produce five such pleasing novels this year — though they may make more noise over fifty inferior ones.

Over Labor Day next year, we shall be holding the World SF Convention in England — to be exact, in Brighton, London's seaside on the south coast. Come over and investigate matters for yourself. As I say, we have come a long way in the fourteen centuries since Beowulf.

COMING SOON

new stories by

Barry Malzberg
Terry Carr
Gary Jennings
Fred Saberhagen
C. J. Cherryh
Manly Wade Wellman
Sterling E. Lanier
Robert R. Young
Avram Davidson
L. Sprague de Camp

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Algis Budrys calls Keith Roberts the best English sf writer (of short work). While he has some stiff competition for that tag, it would be hard to think of another sf writer (American or British) who has turned out high quality work over such a vast range of subjects. He has contributed six stories to F&SF over the years, most recently "The Big Fans," (May 1977). His books include a novel, Pavane, *and* The Passing of Dragons, *a collection of short stories just published by Berkley (reviewed in F&SF, February 1978).*

Ariadne Potts

by KEITH ROBERTS

The summer day was still and hot, sunlight pouring from a sky of deepest blue. By the lake edge the air was cooler, so that Henry Potts, who for an hour or more now had tramped dutifully from *Sequoia* to *Castanes,* from Ilex to Eucalyptus, paused gratefully, producing from his pocket a none-too-white handkerchief with which he proceeded to mop his brow. He had admired the Temple of Flora and the Hermit's Well, ruminated on the Palladian Bridge and the Gothic Cottage, mused on the distant view of the Pantheon, reflected in the dark green, ruffled waters of the great lake. Now he saw from the guide book he had assiduously purchased that he was approaching the Grotto with its painted leaden Nymph (J. Cheere, attributed). She looked altogether a most — well, *fetching* Nymph. He eased the strap of the camera round his neck and wondered if the place would be light enough for a hand-held shot.

Certainly the whole great estate, claimed by many to contain the finest landscape gardens in the world, had a magical air; Henry, despite his somewhat pedestrian appearance, was by no means insensitive to atmospheres of that kind. He was tallish and thin, inclined to stoop and addicted to the wearing of a peculiarly obnoxious brand of Fair Isle pullovers. He also had a professional inclination to absent-mindedness and had been known to turn up on at least one occasion at the small branch bank in which he had worked for a number of years wearing one of the gaudy garments beneath a business suit. Mr. Christopher, the bank's manager, had sent him home indignantly to change.

Though pullovers, on this day of days, had for once been discarded. Henry mopped his face again. Really, one could almost say it was a little *too* warm. Loitering here by the water was pleasant enough, but he supposed he should keep walking. No sense in positively *inviting* a chill. Ahead, a rustic

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bridge spanned an arm of the lake; he crossed it, smelling the ancient green scent of the water. Tall reeds grew in abundance; over them dragonflies darted and hovered, their wings a chestnut blur above the bright sparks of their bodies. Beyond, stands of hydrangeas, flushed now with a haze of lilac and blue, grew to the water's edge.

The path turned and dipped, presenting changing and unexpected vistas on every side, so that he came on the Grotto suddenly and was surprised by its massiveness and extent. Above it, trees grew from traceries of roots that gripped like old gnarled fists; and the path sloped downward sharply, becoming a serptentine walkway flanked by walls of ragged stone.

The chamber he eventually reached was circular, some twelve feet across and constructed of the same ragged blocks. Its floor was of pebbles set in neat concentric rings; an arched opening gave an eye-level prospect of the lake and a stone church set among trees. To either side were little seats in niches, like the sedilia of a cathedral or church; and at the back of the place, reclining on a moss-grown couch, was the Nymph.

Henry peered. She was a very *realistic* Nymph. Almost uncomfortably so. Her head rested on one firm, well-shaped arm. Her other arm curved behind her on her rocky pillow; and her eyes were lowered, as if she contemplated the crystal spring that rose beneath her couch, poured tinkling and chuckling into a half-round basin before flowing away to feed the waters of the lake. One equally shapely knee was turned and a little raised; and her bare toes peeped intriguingly from the hem of her robe.

Henry cleared his throat and held a light meter talisman-fashion toward the object of his scrutiny. Sunlight striking through a round hole in the high-domed roof of the place caused surprisingly bright reflections. He turned the camera, made adjustments, backed and squinted. He took his picture, then another, and a third. Now, if it was possible from that angle there.... He circled, crabwise, wheezed a little, concentrated. The click of the camera's metal eye was lost in the lapping echoes of the water. He wound on, closed the flap of the camera case, peered closely once more, sighed and turned away. She was.... well, not to put too fine a point on it, an *exquisite* Nymph. Henry was not by nature a covetous man, but he would dearly have loved to take her home, have her for his very own.

He stepped away, and a voice behind him said, "I don't suppose people like you ever think of *royalties*...."

He stopped, in consternation and disbelief. For a moment he had almost thought he heard.... He turned back, and the Grotto spun a little. When it steadied, the Nymph was still regarding him with eyes as brown-green and limpid as the waters of her lake.

Obviously he was suffering some sort of delusion, brought on no doubt by the heat. He leaned on the rough wall of the place, passed a hand over his eyes and shuddered. When he looked again, the Nymph was sitting up. "When you've decided whether or not to *faint*," she said, "perhaps you'll help me down off this thing..." Her voice had a lilt in it, like the sound of water,

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and a tiny, not unbecoming lisp. She slid a foot experimentally into the cold crystal of the pool, gathered up her draperies and rose. Henry moved forward, in a species of daze, but the hand she held out to him was firm and cool.

She scuffed down onto the pebbles beside him. She said, "Thank you." Her hair, he saw, was brown too, shot through with the most curious glints of greeny-gold; and she was taller than he had realized, by a good three or four inches. He gulped, swallowed and found his voice, though it came out as a sort of croak. He said, "But you can't.... I mean it isn't..."

She was engaged in drying her ankles, briskly, with the hem of her robe. She said, "Why not? You *wished* me real. Things like that still do occasionally happen, you know." She straightened up, in a businesslike way. She said, "Well, are we ready?"

The Grotto rotated again and threatened for a moment to black out altogether. Henry said in a species of strangled bleat, "W-where are you *going?*"

She flicked her hair back. She said, "With you, of course. I wouldn't be *that* ungrateful."

Henry had the impression of grasping at straws. "B-but you *can't!*"

"And why not?"

Henry flapped a hand feebly, bereft once more of words. The Nymph glanced down and snorted impatiently. She said, "Oh, *that*..." She made swift adjustments to the upper part of her drapery. The result was only a very qualified success. "If you'd seen some of the things *I've* seen down here recently," she said bitterly, "you wouldn't make such a *fuss*. Now, for heaven's sake, come on..."

"W-why are you in such a hurry?"

"If you'd been stuck on that thing for the best part of two hundred years," she said, pressing ahead, "you wouldn't *ask*..."

A curving way led to another chamber. Presiding over it, with a species of gloomy menace, was the massive, green-stained figure of a River God. The Nymph paused in front of him speculatively. "It's a good thing you're not bent," she observed chirpily. "Imagine being stuck with old Rumbleguts over there..."

Beyond the Grotto the path climbed once more, becoming a sunlit stair of rock. At its crest the Pantheon that dominated the lake came abruptly back into sight, huge now and close. The Nymph gazed at it, and her face softened. "I can remember it being built," she said. "It doesn't seem any time at all..."

She marched forward purposefully, looking rather like the Primavera minus her daisy chains. Henry pattered at her heels. If curious glances were cast, he was unaware of them; his world was still spinning, in a dissolute sort of way. The Nymph climbed the steps before the Pantheon, pressed herself to the railing that closed off the entrance and stared up at the great white figures inside, cool and still in a flood of pinkish-amber light. "Good-by, People," she said softly.

They had reached the farthest point of the lakeside walk. They crossed a slender bridge that arched above great floating pads of lily leaves. "*Nymphaea Alba,*" observed the Nymph profession-

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ally. "The only indigenous British water lily. Named after me, of course."

They passed a Cascade, a Rock Bridge, a Hermitage, and a Temple of Apollo; and Henry's alarm once more began to verge on the acute. Ahead, close now, were the Scylla of the Tea Rooms, the Charybdis of the Gift Shop, both thronged with folk; and the Nymph's *dèshabillé* was once more threatening to become total. But at his muttered presentiment that they were both bound to be arrested, she merely tossed her head. "I'm a life member of the Trust," she said. "If there was any justice, I ought to be its *President*. I'd just like to see anybody try!" She marched past the Tea Rooms, unmolested; she marched past the Gift Shop, undeterred. She marched into the grassy meadow beyond, where the cars were parked in their bright rows. "Now," she said, "which is your motor?" Henry glanced back unhappily at the wake of astonishment she had left. He indicated, still speechless, the neat little two-seater that had been his only condescension to the gay life; and she nodded approvingly. "There's hope yet," she said. "You must have hidden depths..." She plumped herself down in the passenger seat. "What's your name, by the way? Mine's Ariadne."

"Er — Henry Potts!"

The Nymph winced. "Ariadne Potts.... Well, I suppose it could be worse..."

"Now look here," said Henry in a species of weak bluster, "you can't come *home* with me! Not just like that!"

"Why? You're not married or anything boring like that, are you?"

"No, but —"

Ariadne took a pair of sunglasses from the dash cubby, popped them on her short nose. She said, "Oh, do get *on* with it, Henry. Before they find out I'm missing..."

"'ART TREASURE STOLEN,'" read Henry over his breakfast marmalade. "'STATUE VANISHES FROM FAMOUS NATIONAL PARK.'"

"'The theft took place yesterday of a figure of the Nymph Ariadne from the Grotto of the world-famous Stourhead Gardens. Police called to the scene admitted themselves baffled by the robbery, which apparently took place in broad daylight, and are anxious to interview an oddly dressed couple seen in the vicinity sometime in the afternoon...'"

"Odd, indeed," said Ariadne. "What lousy cheek..." She poured tea. "Pass your cup, Henry, you're going to be late."

Henry glanced up furtively from behind the paper. One of his pajama jackets, a trifle overlarge and most casually buttoned, was combining with the Nymph's Classical proportions to do the most alarming things to his pulse rate. Ariadne buttered toast composedly. She said, "You'll have to leave me some money, by the way, to buy some more clothes. I'll use that old pair of jeans we found for shopping, and one of your woollies. Then I'll do something about that larder of yours. Honestly, nothing but stuff in *cans*..."

Henry said weakly, "H-how much will you want?"

"Sixty or seventy pounds should do for a start. No, make it seventy if I'm

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doing the housekeeping. Then we'll see."

Henry swallowed. "I haven't got that much in the house!"

"Then I'll stop by at the bank for it. You'd better open us a joint account, by the way, so I shan't have to come pestering you all the time."

"I can't do that!"

"Why on earth not?"

Henry waved his hands desperately. "You haven't got any papers. You need papers to get papers. You don't even *exist!*"

The Nymph took a breath and fixed him with a steely stare. "After last night," she said, "I can only say I'm surprised at you, Henry Potts!"

Henry capitulated. The night had indeed been the most interesting, though undeniably the most hectic, of his life.

Ariadne nodded, in a satisfied sort of way. "That's all right then," she said calmly. "You can tell them at the bank you just met me and married me. *Splot*, just like that. It only takes two minutes in a Registry Office anyway. And papers aren't any problem. If we need them we'll just forge a few. It should be easy, with all your photography and whatnots."

Henry choked, and the Nymph began composedly stacking plates. "You'd better see about an Access card as well, by the way," she said. "With inflation running at twenty-six percent you can positively *make* money on them. I'll see you later on."

Henry rose hurriedly. "Look," he said, "don't come round to the bank. I'll slip back, midmorning. Mr. Christopher won't mind, if I'm quick."

"OK, then," said Ariadne. "See you do..." Then, catching sight once more of the clock: "Darling, you'll have to *fly*. Don't forget your hat..."

Henry scurried for the door, but the Nymph called him back. He stood uncertainly, his hat in his hands; and she put up her cheek, demurely. "Kiss me good-by," she said. "It's customary, with husbands..."

Henry's return visit to the flat later that morning disclosed no sign of Ariadne. The sitting room was empty; in the diminutive kitchen the breakfast crockery was back in its cupboard, the sink tidied, the dishcloth folded neatly on the drain board. Everything looked perfectly normal. He called uncertainly, pushed open the doors of bedroom and bathroom. Nobody. So that was that then; it had been a delusion all along. An impulse made him check the morning paper. He found it folded where he always left it, on the sideboard in the sitting room. The item about the theft at Stourhead was definitely there. So at least he hadn't dreamed that part. Odd that he should have been there himself at the time. But coincidences did happen. Perhaps it would be an idea to slip 'round to the doctor's though, later on, have a chat with him about it. He might be able to give him something for it.

A little self-consciously, he left the brown envelope with the money on the sideboard. It had all cleared itself up, as he had expected all along; it might even turn out to have a perfectly natural explanation. But there was no point in taking chances.

All the same, his work at the bank suffered badly. He found himself dreaming over his ledgers and state-

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ments; twice Mr. Christopher snapped at him in passing. The most persistent of the images that floated between him and the neatly drawn totals was that of a face with eyes as golden-green as lake water, lips that parted to reveal regular, pearly little teeth.

At lunchtime, as was his custom, he betook himself to a small pub set back a few yards from the busy High Street. It was quiet since they had declared the town center a Pedestrian Precinct, almost like a little plaza, with bright-colored sunshades set above pavement tables. He bought himself a Ploughmans and a half of bitter, sat a little furtively listening to the clittering of high heels on flags. Girls in plenty thronged the town, girls in bright summer frocks, but none like Ariadne. Nor did she appear as he finished his snack, made his way back to his place of toil.

By three thirty, when the bank doors were closed and the last of the customers ushered out, he had wholly accepted the notion that she had been nothing more than a figment of his imagination. He had decided against a trip to the doctor's, but he would have to watch himself in the future. He couldn't afford to go round getting figments just like that, not at his time of life. It wasn't respectable. He finished his totting-up and drove home, let himself into the little first-floor flat. He couldn't decide, on balance, whether to be pleased or not.

The Nymph's welcome knocked him fully halfway across the small hall. He recovered himself, gasping, and Ariadne pirouetted in front of him. "I found the most *adorable* little boutique," she said. "What do you think, isn't it great?"

Henry didn't answer. 'It' consisted of a sort of frilly blouse-top thing, tied up high under her breasts; it was worse, if anything, than the Classical Drape. A pair of tight, appallingly pink trousers gave up an admittedly unequal task at a point no self-respecting garment should; while on her feet were arty little sandals, all folk weave and thongs.

"And this," said Ariadne. "And these..." Skirts and dresses, another blouse, bright red cloggy with-it shoes. "They'd got a gorgeous little bikini," said the Nymph happily. "In a sort of goldy-brown, just my color. But I ran a bit short, I shall have to go back. Still, I didn't do badly. Fifty-eight, twenty-three and a half. I got a bill..."

She danced through to the kitchen. Henry tottered after her. The place looked as if a cyclone had hit it. Shelves had been emptied, cupboards turned out; the fridge was defrosting messily, and cartons and carrier bags stood about everywhere. "I threw out all those rotten old teabags," said Ariadne. "I don't know how you can drink that stuff. I got us some proper tea instead. The kettle's on, it won't be a minute." She started arranging dishes. "I bought some new saucepans too. Look, don't you think they're gorgeous.... What we really need is a deep-freeze of course. I thought everybody had one."

Tea consisted of a deftly prepared salad: mounds of lettuce, radishes, carrots and apples diced and tossed in a delicious oil. When it was over, the Nymph bounced onto Henry's still-astonished lap. Up close, she smelled of some faint, delicious scent. "That's

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water hawthorn," she said. "Things happen after a Whotsit's Bath, or didn't you know?" She tickled him. "You breathe in horses' nostrils to make them trust you," she said. "What do you think would happen if I blew down your ear...?"

She was up a clear half-hour before him in the morning, pattering round the kitchen. Delicious smells met Henry as he trudged from the bathroom. "In the normal course of things," said Ariadne sternly, "I don't hold with fried food. But you need some tallow on you, Henry Potts." She slid crisp bacon rashers onto a warmed plate, followed them with an egg like a sunburst. "You'd think," she said, "with all that *stodge* you'd got there, you'd be like a balloon. But there's nothing *to* you!" She giggled, happily. "Leastways, not exactly. But you know what I mean..."

On his way to the bank, Henry found himself positively beaming — at the town, the streets, the folk that thronged them on their way to work. And surely too the sky was bluer; the engine of the little car ran sweeter than he could remember for many a year. His hours of rest, once more, had been hours of revelation. One moment in particular he savored, rolling it round his mind like an aftertaste round the tongue. "Turn over, darling," Ariadne had whispered, "and I'll show you how the ancient Romans used to do it..." So her Classical education, as she had proved, was sound in all departments.

With regard to the Nymph herself, he had given up a thoroughly one-sided struggle. If she *was* a continuing figment of his imagination, then his imagination was fertile enough to be wholly satisfying; while if her entry into his life was the portent of some appalling psychological disorder, he had decided, quite straightforwardly, that he didn't want to be cured. He bounced into the bank; he beamed at the customers; he beamed at Mr. Christopher and at old Miss Peabody, who had been his arch-enemy for years. He even beamed at the pretty little new assistant, who had previously considered "that Mr. Potts" a rather dry old stick, accompanying his beam with what the astonished girl was later only able to construe as a wink. His work thrived, and he hummed his way homeward once more well content.

The sight that met his eyes was, if anything, more alarming than that of the evening before. His wardrobe and chest of drawers, the pegs in the hall, had all been stripped; clothes, old and not so old, were scattered in heaps; and on the largest stack, ominously ticketed JUMBLE SALE, he saw his entire stock of pullovers. He wailed, rushing to their rescue, but the Nymph forestalled him. She was lounged in a chair, a fat catalogue in her lap, looking cool and elegant in a linen shirtwaister dress that surely hadn't been among her purchases of the day before. "Henry," she said, "don't you *dare*.... Come over here and kiss me instead."

Henry obliged, contritely, but to his protests that the offending garments would "do for messing around in," the Nymph turned a deaf ear. "The only messing around you'll be doing in future," she said, "will be with me. And you're *not* doing it in a Fair Isle jumper. Now, what's your inside leg?"

The catalogue, she explained,

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would serve till the next sales came round; she had conned it out of a perfectly dear collector who called at the downstairs flat. The meeting also explained the provenance of the new dress. To her dissertation on the importance of personal image in the modern world, Henry, who had never really thought about the matter before, made no demur. Events had already passed him at the gallop.

"And there's another thing," said the Nymph over supper — a candlelit meal with avocado starters. "While I was clearing some drawers out in the back, I found these." She whacked down, before Henry's startled gaze, his Bank and Building Society pass book. "Do you," she said, "have any serious idea what you're *worth?*"

Henry was a careful man and in fact had a very exact idea. His parents' deaths had left him, though not wealthy, at least comfortably endowed, though his father, with the inexplicable pique of the elderly, had insisted at the last moment on the sale of the family house and furniture, necessitating his removal to the flat. He stammered something to that effect, but the Nymph cut him short. "Then why on *earth,*" she said impatiently, "are you scratching along in a poky little dump like *this?*"

Henry attempted to set out his views on the inadvisability of Breaking into Capital, but his peroration was equally short-lived. "With inflation like this country's got," said Ariadne, "capital is just so much money down the *drain.*" She poured a glass of well-chilled *Liebfraumilch.* Henry felt the delicate fumes rise instantly to his brain.

"Now let's just see," said the Nymph. She figured rapidly. "We needn't pay all cash of course.... so three times your annual salary, put down, say, nine.... we could go up to fifteen, we could get quite a decent place for that. Least, it would do for a *start...*"

Henry wailed, appalled at the instant vision that had come to him of Estate Agents and Searches and Surveys and Exchanges of Contracts. "But mortgage rates are running at twelve percent!"

"Less five for tax relief," corrected the Nymph. "And where else could you borrow money at seven percent? Henry, you can't afford *not* to!"

"B-but..."

"What now? You do make difficulties!"

"I don't *like* estate agents!" It was the way they looked at you, sort of sizing you up; and they were always going round gazumping and such, doing things that were Darker than Night.

"Leave the estate agents to me," said Ariadne calmly. "Is there an evening paper round here?"

"Only the *Echo...*"

"Then get one tomorrow, on your way home. And I'll start doing the rounds. The sooner we get moving, the better!"

"Please, Henry," said Ariadne much later, *"won't* you do it? Not even for *me?"* She sat up beside him, her hair tousled with moonlight, and turned on him the huge pools of her eyes.

* * *

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"And that," said the Nymph, "is all there is to it. I need it; it's an essential. So we shall just have to put up with it. Look on its as an investment."

But.... Collyer, Son and Partners, the longest established and most exclusive saddlers and outfitters in the district! Collyers, still ensconced in the High Street of Midchester, whose emporium breathed out an air of leather and sanctity onto the uninitiated.... Henry attempted, feebly, to compute the cost of a complete riding outfit from them and gave up. "If you'd only go somewhere cheaper..."

"I am *not*," said Ariadne coldly, "putting myself up in a badly fitting *jacket*..."

"But you don't even *like* horses! Not all that *much!*"

"I agree they aren't quite my image," said the Nymph composedly. "And I always felt there was something wrong-side-of-the-blanket about the Centaurs anyway. But that's not the point. It isn't for me, it's for Mr. Vanderkloss. The *senior* Mr. Vanderkloss..."

"That old crook!" howled Henry. "He's the biggest twister in town!"

"I agree he's mature," said the Nymph distantly. "But, as a matter of fact, he's perfectly *sweet*. And he *adores* riding."

"But half the stuff he handles doesn't even have hoofs! When you're in my position, you hear things!"

"You aren't *in* a position," said Ariadne crushingly. "Not as yet anyway. As for his property list, *I* happen to know there's a very nice detached indeed coming on the market soon. Twenty-seven-foot lounge, patio, three bedrooms, bathroom and fitted kitchen, separate toilet, recently modernized, gas C.H. throughout..."

"It's out of the question..."

"Garage, mature garden," said the Nymph dreamily. "Secluded position on No Through Road, fitted carpets optional. Not that we shall *want* them of course, they're bound to be *appalling*..."

"They'll want twenty thousand!"

"They might *want* it," said the Nymph, looking demure. "But Mr. Vanderkloss is going to discover the most *appalling* attack of dry rot..." She slid snakily onto Henry's lap, twined her arms round his neck. "I don't like it when you're cross," she whispered. "Let's go to bed..."

The following day, a Saturday, saw Henry driving complainingly to Midchester, decanting a delighted Nymph — she had chosen sober, spectacularly tailored tweeds for the expedition, and was looking about as County as it was possible to get — on the hallowed doorstep of Mr. Collyer, his Son and Partners. A few days and the loss of his mustache later ("Grow your *hair* instead," Ariadne had said) he drove, equally protestingly, to the riding stables of her choice, parked outside the tall red-brick gatepillars with their imposing ornamental lanterns. "You'd better not come inside," said Ariadne thoughtfully. "You're not *quite* ready yet; we can't have you frightening the horses." She tickled his ear playfully with her crop and was gone.

Henry watched her striding away from him up the drive of the place. Her boots, her cap, her breeches were immaculate, the fit of her jacket a thing to

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marvel at; her hair, drawn into a severe Classical bob, set off to perfection the swanlike grace of her neck and throat, where floated a wisp of bright chiffon. The expression on his face was curious. In part, certainly, it was one of admiration; in part, regrettably, of lust; but there was also something else, that seemed quite alien to him.

Within what seemed to Henry an indecently short span of time an offer for the place had been made and accepted; searches had been completed, inspections carried out and contracts exchanged. A small army of workmen had descended, banging that which was bangable, tapping that which was tappable and painting almost everything; but now they too were gone.

"And the beauty of it is," said the Nymph, wielding a tack hammer enthusiastically, "is that it will all be yours one day. Paying *rent* gets you *nowhere...*" She sat back on her heels. "There, doesn't it look *great?*"

Henry turned, slightly startled, from a contemplation of her expanse of jean-clad bottom. The long room, west-facing, was lit by the rays of the setting sun. French doors stood ajar; beyond were lawns and rockeries, a shrub garden, a fishpond where a little fountain played. The plaster gnomes that had been discovered infesting it had been conveyed by Ariadne, tight-lipped, to the dustbin. Henry lay back negligently in one of the big deep leather-covered chairs discovered by the Nymph in Midchester Antiques — the owner, mysteriously, had halved the price on the sale tickets — and regarded his new domain. The money already paid out had kept him from what remained of his sleep for weeks, but that was in the past now too. A pipe was between his lips, a decanter and soda syphon on the table at his side; and it seemed the world had never before been quite such a capital place.

The Nymph walked to him, soundless on bare feet, curled herself on the arm of the chair. She said. "Your hair's growing nicely now. And, ooh, *look,* Henry, it's *curling!* You're beginning to look most distinguished..."

Henry pinched her, with the ease of long familiarity. She giggled and retaliated. The wrestling match that ensued landed them on the floor. Henry sat up puffing. "Mind the Scotch. No, *mind!*"

He pushed the hair out of his eyes. He said, "Y'know, Ary, I've been thinking."

"Hmmm... don't think. Let's go and look at the shrubbery again."

"No, listen. That job I was talking about. Assistant manager in the Midchester branch. I was thinking of having a go for it."

"What does Mr. Christopher say?"

"Doesn't think I've got a chance."

"Hmpph. Boo to him. *I'll* come and see him if he doesn't watch it."

She sat up, frowning.

"What's the matter? Don't you think I'd get it either?"

The Nymph tossed her head. "*Course* you would! It wasn't that. It's just..." she put her head on one side, considered. "Assistant manager. Then branch manager. Hmm..."

"What's the matter?"

"It sounds so... sort of humdrum. You're worth better!"

Henry said, "It's a good secure position."

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She wrinkled her nose. "You know what I think about that!"

"Well, you have to allow for these things."

"I have done," said Ariadne. "I was secure for long enough. It doesn't bear thinking about..." Then her eyes widened, and she grasped his arm. "Henry, I *forgot!* I haven't even *seen* them yet!"

"W-what?"

"Your photographs," said the Nymph. "The ones I *have* seen are super. You could make a *fortune!*"

Henry said, "If I've told you once I've told you a dozen times —" But she was already rushing about, closing curtains, switching on wall lights, setting up screens. "Quick," she said. "Get the projector..."

The fan of the little Aldis roared companionably. Henry worked the slide carrier, and the Nymph, her arms draped companionably across his knees, took her thumb from her mouth. She said, *"Gosh..."*

He had shown her, first, his collection of flower studies. The boxes in which he kept them were tidily labeled. British (Wild), Horticultural, Exotic; Roses (Shrub), (Climbing) and (Tea). Then his canal pictures, the views he had taken on his one trip to Scotland. "Seascapes, Various" followed; then birds and animals, dogs, Domestic and Church Architecture. He had had a passion, at one time, for fonts; they too had acquired a special category. Ariadne had "Oohed" with pleasure, "Aahed" with uncertainty; and finally lapsed into silence. So he had turned to the boxes he kept a little apart from the rest. "Garden Statuary of Britain...." His hand hesitated over them, a natural delicacy holding him back; but if the Nymph remembered her own origins, she paid no heed. From the very first tranparency, her attention was riveted. The "Oohs" and "Aahs" returned, in crescendo; finally she leaped up. "Henry," she said, "you're a genius!"

"Oh," he said modestly, "I wouldn't say that. Look, there's loads more yet."

She settled back. "Show me them all!"

He complied. Across the screen passed the mermen and conch-blowing Tritons, the dolphins and dragons, the cupids and Herakles of the eighteenth century fancy; and girls with laurel wreaths, boys with poodles, Gods and Queens and fisherboys, monkeys and chimaeras, horsemen and lions; and finally, of course, the Nymphs. They had been his secret passion for years. Nymphs in sunlight, Nymphs in dappled green shade, Nymphs at dawn and in shadowed dusk, rain-wet Nymphs glistening against dark-grey skies. Nymphs who ran and danced, Nymphs who lounged beside cool pools, Nymphs who wore gowns of Classical loveliness, Nymphs who wore chaplets of flowers and fruit, Nymphs who wore nothing at all. "Look at *that* one," Ariadne said. "She's just like me.... Oh, and that one, she's *gorgeous*.... Henry, that's really *naughty!* No, please go back, I want another *look...!*"

It was the small hours before the show was finished; and Henry turned the room lights on, switched off the projector lamp and left it to blow itself cool. The Nymph bustled about in the kitchen, making coffee and bits and pieces. She said, "They're *marvelous*. It

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was like a sort of trip..."

Nobody had ever seen Henry's collection before. Nobody had ever wanted to. He started coiling leads away. He said, "There's some good *compositions* there."

"Compositions, my foot," shouted the Nymph from the gallery. "They're sexy, every one, they're fizzing with it. You've got a sort of eye for it..."

Henry started folding up the screen. "I wouldn't say that..."

"I don't think you can even *see* it! They had me going up the wall!"

Henry said severely, "That's *enough*, Ariadne!" But she was not to be put down. "I told you we hadn't started," she said, setting down plates and cups. "Now I'll prove it. I'm going to London!"

Henry groaned. "It's no use, I've told you before. I've had my name on the books with half a dozen agencies for years. It's all syndicated, all that sort of stuff. Amateurs don't get a look in."

"You haven't got 'all that sort of stuff.' Yours is different! And you didn't have *me* to sell it before!"

"You'll be wasting your time."

"There is always a market," said the Nymph primly, "for sophisticated eroticism. People get fed up with the other sort." She sucked her thumb again, thoughtfully. "I shall need some new outfits of course," she said. "You know how I feel about Image."

Henry spluttered over his coffee. "You had three new dresses last week!"

"I can't go to London in *those!* And I can't wear *tweeds*. They'd think I was up from the country.... And we'd better buy a new projector as well, an automatic. So I can keep on talking while they're going through. It'll be an investment..."

Henry groaned. "But they cost *hundreds...*"

Ariadne came and tucked herself down by his feet, huddling up very small. She put her arms on his knees and stared up steadily with her great eyes. "The last time I made an investment," she said, "we got this house. Don't you trust me *yet?*"

The Nymph looked over the tops of the flyaway hornrim glasses she now sometimes affected. Her vision, actually, was as near twenty/twenty as made no odds, but she claimed they gave her a more mature, responsible air. "The *Observer* is talking about another series," she said. "The money isn't too bad, but the agent says to hold out, he thinks he can get more. And he still says *Playboy* is definitely interested. With devaluation bonus, that ought to be worth at least two thousand a shot. Less commission, say fifteen hundred. Oh, and there's another calendar commission in; I've already accepted that. 'A Nymph throughout the seasons.' Just one girl. It'll be different."

Henry said, "Who are we using?"

She lowered her eyes. "Me, actually. I thought it would save on model fees. What do you want to do about the *Observer?*"

"Better do as he says. He's been right most times so far."

The typewriter clattered. Ariadne said "Damn" and backspaced. She said, "What we really need is another machine. This one's clapped. Particularly if we're going to have a go at that other thing we talked about."

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Henry said, "I really think we've got enough on our hands at the moment, my dear."

He was sitting, crossed legs stuck out, very much at ease in a fawn sweater and fawn, knife-creased slacks. His hair, curling elegantly about his ears, was touched with a silver that gave him added dignity. He was going through the page proofs of his latest book, *Exotic Journey*. (Illustrations by the well-known photographer Henry Potts, text by his wife Ariadne). His first book, *Living Ornaments*, had hit the somewhat staid market of the high-price glossies like a small bomb and had run to an unbelievable six editions; it had enabled him to pay off his mortgage, and they were looking for another place already. One of the results of its publication, a popular cult of Garden Nymphs, had grown till it finally attracted the attention of the media; and Henry, with unprecedented acumen, had acquired a controlling interest in a small run-down manufactory on the outskirts of Midchester, which was now busily engaged turning out fiberglass copies of his most famous subjects for export to places as far removed as California and Hong Kong. Ariadne, showing hitherto-unsuspected skills, had designed a series of what she called Exciting Birdbaths, to be produced in the same material; and they were selling like hot cakes too. The future looked decidedly rosy.

The Nymph took her glasses off and yawned. She walked across to Henry, plucked the galleys out of his hands and threw them on the table. She said, "You've done enough of that old stuff for one day. Make room for *me*." She kissed his ear and started twirling with his hair. She said, "I want to talk about *our* book."

Henry protested. "You know I can't write *novels*..."

"You don't have to. I'll dictate it to you. It'll be a smash hit, you know how popular romantic fiction is."

"It's still a new field. I reckon we should stick to what we know."

"Diversification," caroled Ariadne, "is the springboard of commercial success. Anyway, it can't miss. Not with what *I* shall put in it. I was there you see. I *really* know what happened. The material's endless. And some of the goings-on you just wouldn't *believe*..."

Henry reached for his whisky, but she trapped his arm. She said, "I shan't *let* you. Not till you say yes..."

"You'll have the chair over in a minute!"

"Say *yes!*"

"Oh, very well. If it will keep you quiet."

She kissed him. "You're a *darling*... and can I have a new typewriter then? *Please*..."

"I suppose so..."

The Nymph said, *"Mmmmm..."* She sat up, regarding Henry solemnly.

She said, "I *knew* you'd say yes. So as a matter of fact..."

He narrowed his eyes. He said, "I'm waiting."

She hung her head. She said, "Well, I sort of *saw* one. The other day, in Midchester. It was just what we wanted..."

Henry said, *"Where is it?"*

"In your study. It's a beauty. Honest, you'll love it. Henry, *wait*..."

But he had already plunged

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through the door. A moment later a howl of anguish rent the air. "An IBM... six hundred bloody quids' worth..."

She ran to him. But Henry, for the first time, had thoroughly lost his temper. He pointed a trembling finger at the monster that had invaded his study. "It goes straight *back...*"

"It can't! I paid half cash down!"

Henry howled afresh. "We're up to here already. *Here,* I tell you. Now this... this..."

"But it's all deductible. And it isn't our money anyway, it's only the company's. It's an expendable asset!"

"Sometimes," fumed Henry, "as far as the company's concerned, *I* seem to be an expendable asset!"

"Don't talk nonsense! Everything I've done's been for you!"

Henry ticked off on his fingers. "I used to sleep at nights. Now my ulcers are growing ulcers. I used to have a nine-to-five. Now I work all hours God sends..."

"You're just *ungrateful!*"

"All I'm trying to do is get us back in the black..."

"But we don't *want* to be in the black! We'll get *taxed!*"

"Last week I almost managed it..."

"I know! That's why we had to have the Volvo!"

"We had to have the Volvo," bellowed Henry, "because you nagged and nagged till it nearly drove me *spare!*"

"I *didn't* nag! I *never* nag! I was only thinking of what was best!"

"You know it all, don't you..."

The Nymph faced him, breasts heaving. "Sometimes, I think I do! And so far, Henry Potts, I haven't been too far *wrong!* Look what you were when I found you! A tatty little man working in a bank!"

"Don't you call me a tatty little man!"

"I *didn't!* I'm *not!*"

Henry took a deep breath. He said with exaggerated patience, "All I want, is a say in what my own firm does. Just now and then. Is that being too unreasonable?"

"You're the one who's being unreasonable! You do get a say, every time!"

"Then what about *that?*"

The Nymph drew herself up. She said, "That was different. You'd have said no. Now, you can't. I've made an investment!"

"The next time I hear that word," said Henry, blowing through his nostrils like an overworked horse, "I will not be responsible for my actions..."

"Investment! Investment!"

Henry said, *"That's it..."* He made a flying grab for the Nymph, who eeled back out of reach. The slammed door held him up for vital seconds; he almost caught her at the foot of the stairs, but she slipped past him again. He skidturned into the lounge. Furniture crashed, a standard lamp went flying. He pinned her finally, with a species of flying tackle. She squalled and writhed; he rolled her across his knee, regardless, and spanked until his shoulder ached. When he paused for breath, she was still wriggling, making little mewing noises to herself. "Henry," she said, "You're so *masterful,* you've never done *anything* like that before. Don't stop..."

"*The God in the Garden,*'" read

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the Nymph, "'the latest from the pen of that remarkable storyteller Henry Potts, is in the opinion of this reviewer his best novel to date. Potts' spicy sagas show an insight into the doings of the eighteenth century, both great and humble, that is one of the literary phenomena of our time; while his clear-cut imagery and incisive style are only to be expected from one who, before turning to the written word, had already made an international reputation as a photographer of Stately Homes and the curious and frequently exotic inhabitants of their grounds....'"

She put the paper down. "The clippings agency sent about a dozen more reviews this morning," she said. "They're all pretty good. And the publishers wrote to say they're reprinting *The Lost Nymph* again. How many impressions is that?"

"I don't know," said Henry shortly. "Eight or ten. It doesn't make much difference."

The Nymph looked at him reproachfully. Success had changed him somehow. His manner was harsher, more abrupt, and he had taken to drinking a good deal more than was good for him. His answer, invariably, was that it was his money and he could spend it how he chose. If he bought malt whisky by the crate, it was his own affair.

The breakthrough had finally come with the *Playboy* contract. Their gatefold series, live girls posed against their stone and metal counterparts, had been simple enough in conception; but Henry's camera had once more worked its magic. Afterwards a calendar had been produced that had acquired an international notoriety second only to that recently enjoyed by the firm of Pirelli. The little company in Midchester had likewise expanded, introducing a new line of figures cast from living models; and Henry's reputation had finally been assured by a writ for obscenity served on him by a well-known and noble do-gooder. The resulting publicity had assured the company work for many months to come; and Henry had diversified again, taking under his control a firm of landscape architects and another that specialized in the supply of decorative building stone. After that, the Potts, now with an entourage that included a secretary, a cook-housekeeper and a full-time gardener, had removed themselves to more distinguished surroundings; Henry looked down now from the first-floor windows of a not inconsiderable eighteenth-century manor house onto an immaculate sweep of lawns and graveled drives. Beside the Volvo Estate, still used for Henry's photographic jaunts abroad, stood a big Mercedes; farther along the creeper-hung frontage was parked Ariadne's old but much-loved XKE. A peacock strutted importantly on the terrace; beyond, over the wall that enclosed the grounds, the tops of cars and trucks moved silently like manifestations from another world.

Henry sloshed whisky negligently into a glass. He said, "I shall have to go to Germany again next week, probably Tuesday. Finish that job for Sondermann Verlag. I shall probably be gone about ten days."

The Nymph said softly, "Oh, no..."

He turned to her irritably. The day had been sultry, sticky; thunder was in

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the offing, and the evening air had brought no relief. He said, "I can't put it off any longer. And we need the money. We don't live in a three and a half room flat any more, or hadn't you noticed?"

She didn't answer; and he drank, set the glass down, poured himself another. She walked to him, tried to slip onto his lap; but he pushed her aside. He said wearily, "Not again... it's your answer to everything, isn't it?"

She stood aside, quietly. She said, "It's just that I don't like to see you unhappy."

"I'm *not* unhappy! And I doubt frankly if *that* ever entered your mind..." He drummed his fingers. "Oh, for God's sake leave me alone. Don't stand there *staring*. Just give me some peace, can't you? It isn't much to ask..."

She said, "Shall I go away?"

"Yes. No. Oh, do what you like. I don't care..."

She didn't speak, and he in turn didn't move his head, but he knew she hadn't left the room. He knew too, from experience, the expression that would be on her face, the dumb reproach, the animal hurt in the big wide eyes. It was a trick, like all the rest, a trick to get her own way. She had tricked him all the time; no direction he had ever taken had truly been his; no decision he had made had been his own. He knew her now too well. He knew that in the night to come, the hot, sticky night, she would snuggle up to him; he knew the tricks she would use to rouse him, the posturings, the pretended resistance, the equally make-believe submission. "*Hurt me,*" she would whisper. "Please hurt me..." She, the unhurtable. Sometimes now he thought back, almost with longing, to the old days at the bank: Miss Peabody's acrid morning smiles, Mr. Christopher's gruff and predictable complaints. He wondered why he had ever desired Ariadne, and her alone. Her body was like ten thousand other bodies, ten million. No better, and no worse. He should know; he had seen enough of them, over the years. Except, perhaps, that hers would never age.

She said in a small voice, "Henry..."

"What is it *now?*"

She said, "I... wouldn't mind. Honestly. If you went away. With... some of the others. You could get them now. I'd still be here when you came back..."

He turned to face her slowly. He said, "*What?*"

She hung her head. She said, "I can thought-read. I always could. I'm sorry..."

He said, "If that isn't the last bloody *straw...*" He flung the glass away. It broke. He felt, quite suddenly, the need to hurt her; make her, just for once, *feel*. It was a need he had felt before and put from him, unaccepted. "There used," he said, "to be a grand old-fashioned word. Privacy. But it doesn't seem to exist now. Not any more..."

Most certainly, the whisky had got to him, but it was too late to care. He heard his own voice dimly, shouting, and some of her answers.

"You've been smarter than I have all along, haven't you? You've always been smart. Is that why you latched on to me in the first place? Because you thought you could work me, twist me

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round your finger? Well, *is it?*"

"It wasn't like that! It wasn't like that at all!"

"You were laughing at me!"

"No!"

"Don't lie to me! You thought I didn't know! Well, I do know! I know everything I need to!"

She was talking again, or mumbling. He said incredulously, *"What?"*

"I... it doesn't matter. I only said... that I forgive you. After all, you're only a mortal..."

"Why, you cheeky little —"

She was shaking her head, like a pony trying to get away from flies. She said, "It doesn't matter. Not any more. I thought... but it's all right..."

"Doesn't matter?" shouted Henry, beside himself. *"Doesn't matter?* You stand there and patronize me, then tell me it doesn't matter...!"

She seemed to be having trouble speaking. "I... thought you were different. That's all. Kind. But you're... all the same really, when it comes down to it..."

"Meaning you're tired of me!"

"I'm not!"

"You don't want me! You never did!"

She stamped her foot. "Not like *this* I don't!"

"Well, I don't want you! I —" He stopped and she stared at him, fists clenched. "Go on, Henry," she said. "Say it..."

Henry swallowed. "I wish," he said, slowly, driving the words between his teeth like daggers, *"that you'd never come to life..."*

An odd thing happened. She swung away, spun round as if hit by some physical blow. She stood a moment, shoulders hunched; then she turned back. "Henry," she said, "have you ever seen a statue cry? Then take a good, hard look..." She ran from the room. He heard her feet on the stairs; then the door slammed shut behind her.

He sat a moment in stunned silence. Then realization dawned. He shouted, *"Ariadne...!"*

He ran for the stairs, the great hall. But he was too late. Gravel splashed outside; he ran again, glimpsed the red tail of the Jaguar vanishing through the high stone gateposts of the drive. He flung himself at the Merc, scrabbled the door undone. The gateposts veered past him; he hauled at the wheel, hauled straight again, pushed his foot down to the floor. But fast as he drove, the low red car moved faster.

The daylight faded. He glimpsed the Jag again, twice; on the main road junction and on the motorway approach beyond. Then it was lost in the jewel strings of tail lights that flashed down endlessly, into the still-bright west. He took the Mercedes to a hundred and beyond, cutting recklessly from lane to lane. Headlights flashed behind him; horns yelled indignantly, but he paid no heed. Of the red car, there was no sign. Fifty miles on he pulled onto the hard shoulder, sat trembling, drinking in great gulps of warm night air. He wiped his face and the rim of the wheel and set himself to drive again.

It was past midnight before he reached his destination; but the night, that had been velvet-black, was no longer so. Thunder grumbled and

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crashed, lightning danced a great pink flickering dance above the clouds. The reflections showed him the shuttered Gift Shop, the shuttered Tea Rooms, glanced from the still expanse of the lake beyond. By the railings that fenced the place off, its cockpit empty, stood the XKE.

He skidded the Mercedes to a halt, left the door swinging. The entrance turnstiles were chained and padlocked; he vaulted them and began to run. The lightning blazed again, showed him vast mounds of velvet that were the stands of trees. He shouted again, his voice thin and lost. *"Ariadne..."*

The temples by the lake edge stared, with faces of tilted bone. He reached the rustic bridge, stumbled across. The path turned and dipped; he ran again, lost his footing and rolled. A water bird erupted from the lake; he sat up breathing harshly, and the storm broke, with a flash and peal. Rain hissed into the lake in drenching curtains, poured down through the leaves of the great gnarled trees.

And there was the descending path, the humped shape of the Grotto. He stumbled, hands to the rough walls, feeling the cold air breathe from ahead. His own shout roared from the cavern, mixed with the thunder voice. He splashed knee-deep into the cistern; he flung his hands out, groping blind, and touched a figure of painted lead.

ABOUT THE COVER

This month's cover is by F&SF regular David Hardy, of Birmingham, England. It is from *The New Challenge of the Stars* by David A. Hardy and Patrick Moore (1977).

For details of David Hardy space art – originals (inc. F&SF covers), posters, books, etc., send int'l reply coupon to: Astro Art, 99 Southam Road, Birmingham B28 OAB, England.

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John Brunner (b. 1934 Oxfordshire) has been writing since the early 1950's and has published hundreds of short stories and dozens of novels, including The Whole Man, The Squares of the City, Stand On Zanzibar (*Hugo award winner*), The Wrong End of Time, The Productions of Time (*serialized in F&SF*) *and many others. He lives in London and has been a fairly regular contributor to F&SF over the years.*

The Man Who Understood Carboniferous Flora

by JOHN BRUNNER

What could have happened to the path?

On the outward leg of my stroll, half an hour ago, I had followed one through this woodland with no trouble. On the way back, though, I must somehow have missed it, for I had reached a spot where bindweed was strangling the nettles and brambles kept clutching at my clothes.

I stopped. And found that I was shivering in the middle of a sunny summer day.

The air rang with the sound of birds. But they were not chirping. They were uttering alarm cries. Was my intrusion the sole cause?

Ahead the path turned into a tunnel among dense underbrush. Suddenly I realized that, centered in it like the bead on the foresight of a gun, was the unmistakable white tuft of a rabbit's scut. My anxiety faded. I must be on a poacher's beat.

Expecting to find the creature freshly strangled by a neat wire noose, I poked it with my walking stick.

It was not a whole rabbit. It was the hindquarters only, crawling with maggots among the fur. The forepart had already been reduced to bone and carrion, and at my touch the skull rolled to the ground. It was held by nothing more substantial than strands of greenery. There was no snare.

Shaken and not a little nauseated by this repulsive discovery, I determined to plough on rather than retreat in the hope of regaining my original path. I was, after all, in Essex, less than fifty miles from London; sooner or later I was bound to chance on habitation, and I had the afternoon to kill. And probably tomorrow, and next day, and next week....

But within a few more minutes I was having second thoughts. The tree branches interlaced ever more tightly overhead; the clinging, grasping tendrils on either side delayed me more and more often and were unbelievably

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tough. Slashing at them with my stick wearied my arm; soon, plodding onward tired my legs as well. Yet I could not pluck up the courage to turn back. The route behind looked as though the thorns and briars, defeated once, had summoned reinforcements.

After what felt like half eternity, I saw clear sky in front of me again and hastened forward with so little regard for where I put my feet that I stubbed my toe on something large and hard and fell forward, barking my shins and uttering an involuntary cry of pain as all the prickly and noxious plants in the vicinity seemed to choose me simultaneously for prey. Not until I had brushed them aside, and blinked away a few tears, did I realize what I had stumbled on: a toppled tombstone, its inscription rendered illegible by lichen.

"I say! Are you all right?" a voice called. Relieved, I scrambled to my feet. Approaching was a man in garb appropriate for these treacherous woods: gauntlets, gumboots, a thornproof tweed suit. Over one shoulder he carried a camera case; over the other, a specimen box on a strap of the kind used by botanists and entomologists. A limp linen hat shaded his face, and moreover he was so completely out of context that it took me a long moment to recognize him. When I did, I burst out, "Mr. Secrett! Is it really you?"

I had never before seen him outside the dingy corridors of the Royal Society for Applied Linguistics, whose chief librarian he has been for decades. I had almost come to assume that this man to whom I have so often appealed for information not merely *recherché* but *outré* had no private life: was magically switched on and off at opening and closing time.

But plainly a change of setting did nothing to change his nature. Having identified me, he gave a snort.

"I presume you've lost your way?"

To which I could only reply with an embarrassed nod.

"Hah! You of all people should know better than to get lost within a mile of where you started!"

"And how do you know where I started from?" I demanded.

"Oh, everyone who reads the *East Essex Clarion* has had the chance to learn that a certain millionaire film producer has invited an unknown — or relatively little-known" (he amended before I could snap his head off) "writer to his magnificent country estate for the weekend. Your press agent must be quite efficient. But you've gravely disappointed the local populace, whose chief pastime is to line the road leading to Mr. Casparole's place hoping to glimpse faces already familiar to them from television.... So why are you not reclining in the lap of luxury, toasting in champagne your signature on a contract worth a fortune to Mr. Casparole and possibly a pittance to yourself?"

"Because," I said sourly, "Mr. Casparole is in California. And because he left his bloody awful dog behind."

While we were talking, Mr. Secrett had been ushering me away from the spot where I fell over with the air of someone well accustomed to the area. Now we had come in sight of what I had more or less expected: a chapel, probab-

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ly built by a dissenting sect in the late years of last century, its roof fallen in and its main door, as well as its windows, barricaded with rusty corrugated iron. There were, in the surrounding grass, a few more tombstones, overgrown or askew, and not more than twenty in sum. The sect must have been short-lived.

But one of the tombs was more elaborate than the rest, and on it Mr. Secrett had laid out a picnic: bread, cheese, an apple, and a flagon of beer. He invited me to sit down, which I did willingly; offered me a bite of food, which I declined honestly, for my breakfast had killed my appetite; and slaked my thirst by handing me the beer.

"One is not surprised by Mr. Casparole's absence," he said musingly. "I believe you're not the first victim. How did it happen?"

"I arrived at the station and was met by some flunky or other, who simply said his boss had been called away on urgent business but I was welcome to wait at Tower House until he got back. Thinking, of course, that he had probably gone up to London —"

"And anxious, like all underpaid authors, to taste the fleshpots before it's too late...?" Mr. Secrett gently interpolated between mouthfuls.

I sighed. "Yes, a bit of that too. Not that, now I've seen them, the fleshpots look particularly tempting."

"Was there anybody at home when you arrived?"

"Oh, hordes. Mostly servants, and heaven knows what indignities they have to put up with or what salary they command! And three girlfriends all strung out — I swear — all on different drugs: one on speed, one on acid, one on aitch, to the point where they literally can't communicate.... Oh, I'm sorry. I should have said —"

"You," said Mr. Secrett with a severe expression, "make yourself entirely too clear. The newspapers keep one *au fait*, you know. But what about this dog?"

I gave my nearest imitation of the traditional hollow laugh.

"Dog? Well, it may look like one. But according to the — the butler, I suppose you'd have to call him, the guy who acts as spokesman for the servants, anyhow — according to him, Mr. Casparole believes it to be the reincarnation of his chief spirit guide. Never mind that it resembles a cross between a pig and a Shetland pony. Never mind that it pees on everything, especially the belongings of visitors who haven't been around long enough to be permeated by the stench. Never mind that it must be suffering from worms, because it's constantly so hungry it will eat *anything* — socks, shoes, ties, books, you name it! No, all that counts is that this is the current bodily form of the Guru Boddhisatva Flowing Stream."

"Are you serious?" Mr. Secrett peered at me under bushy brows as though his long years of wearing bifocals for close work had conditioned him forever.

"Am I serious? No, he's serious!" I tried to laugh normally, but I detected a hint of hysteria in the sound. "So is everybody else around the place! Those girls I mentioned — at supper last night they put their plates on the floor for this horrible animal, before eating

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anything themselves, and only swallowed what he left! If I hadn't had to take a cheap return ticket which isn't valid on Sundays, I'd be safely home right now! My luggage has become light enough to carry to the station, after throwing away what that bloody beast has spoiled!"

"I gather it's turning into an expensive trip?"

"Mr. Casparole is too smart to give writers money in advance. So it was an expensive trip before it started. Now it's ruinous. Once or twice in the past I've run into people hung up on 'spirit guides,' but I promise you I've only read about someone as obsessed as this by a bloody dog!"

"I suspect you may be referring to Adolf Hitler," said Mr. Secrett. "Who, towards the end of his life, kept a puppy he called 'Little Wolf' and would not allow anybody else to touch or feed."

Somehow, Mr. Secrett invariably contrives to undermine me. However, I suppose that's good for the soul. If there is such a thing.

Without asking permission I took another swig of his beer. And said at length, "Damn it! The trouble is I actually like dogs!"

"The same way you like people," Mr. Secrett said dryly. "With exceptions for special cases. So far as that goes, you much resemble me, which is doubtless why I tolerate you. I came here on an entirely different errand. I should have finished my lunch and gone back to work by now. It's rarely that I have time to make this — this pilgrimage, as it were."

I seized the opening. "Yes! Why are you here?"

He checked me with a raised hand. "I was about to ask: how did Mr. Casparole acquire this cur?"

"Oh, it was given to him. He likes getting presents. My agent told me so when he first mentioned the possibility of a deal. But I couldn't think of anything I could afford which he might like."

"It is difficult to pander to an obsessive," Mr. Secrett said in judicious tones. He took a swig from the beer bottle and added: "Particularly if the obsessive has a body of evidence to support his view. Your description of this dog makes it sound like a most unsaintly beast. If, on the other hand, you had described it as sagacious, affectionate and well-mannered to a fault, one could see grounds for Mr. Casparole's conviction.... You know, one might almost wonder whether certain places have a kind of attraction for particular personality types. This estate has belonged to a succession of people with bees in their bonnets."

"Are we actually on Casparole's estate, here?" I demanded.

"Oh, yes. He has about five or six hundred acres, I believe."

"I see. So this would have been a family chapel?"

"Somewhat more than that. James Howland, who built it — and Tower House too, of course — in about 1880, was a distiller who developed a bad conscience. Having sold his business at a tidy profit, he founded a schismatic Christian sect, doctrinally not dissimilar from the Plymouth Brethren, which he called the Number of the Elect. For-

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tunately death prevented him from achieving his stated aim, which was to recruit one hundred and forty-four thousand followers, whereupon the world would automatically come to an end. Even before that, there had been several splits in the movement, and at one stage half his congregation emigrated *en masse* to America.

"After the First World War, when the house was taken over as an officers' convalescent home, it passed into the ownership of someone you may have heard of: Professor Amyas King?"

"Good lord!" I said, startled. "The palaeobotanist? A friend of Russell, and Haldane, and Bernal? But his home was called...." I cudgeled my brains unsuccessfully. "Well, certainly not Tower House," I concluded.

"Correct. During his tenure it was temporarily known as Battlements, at his wife's suggestion, I believe."

"I didn't realize!" I exclaimed. "And — well, frankly, in some ways I'm rather sorry you told me. I've always imagined Battlements as a rather special place, what with some of the finest intellects of the age arguing on the terrace after dinner.... Didn't Freud come here once or twice? And to see it now, its front lawn replaced with an expanse of green concrete because it doesn't need mowing, and, worse yet, to smell it —!" I couldn't prevent myself from shuddering.

"I'm told that during the last part of Professor King's life it was also somewhat unsavory," said Mr. Secrett. "While she lived, his wife managed the place with great efficiency, but she died tragically young, very likely from exhaustion, for by all accounts he was a man almost impossible to live with, brilliant but markedly eccentric. This was in the late thirties — 1937 or 1938. But he had already estranged a great many of his friends and colleagues. He was convinced that the conventional picture of evolution on this planet omitted a complete chapter in the history of plant life. Do you know about this?"

I shook my head.

"I'm scarcely surprised. If he had had the sense to wait until he had been elected to the Royal Society before launching his rudest and wildest attacks on his colleagues' dimwittedness, he might have been able to achieve his ambition and have his theories accorded at least a respectful mention in the standard texts. As it was, he grew so vituperative that all the scientific papers he sent to recognized journals during his last few years of life had to be returned as unfit for publication because they were more personal libel than reports of his work. So bad did the situation become that when at last he attempted to publish his writings himself, printer after printer simply declined to set his venomous effusions in type. And, of course, he was never made an FRS."

"What was this theory that he set such store by?"

"Well, as you doubtless know, some three hundred million years or so ago there was a period called the Carboniferous Age?"

"I've read something to that effect," I murmured.

"Vegetation proliferated amazingly; it was the true conquest of the land, one might say, and during it the very

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composition of the air was altered. Concurrently animal life also expanded, mainly in the form of insects the like of which have never reappeared. There were, for instance, dragonflies with a span of thirty inches. Then there followed a very active period of mountain building which must have been extremely inimical to life, for only some three hundred species are known from this Permian Age, whereas many thousand have been discovered belonging to the Carboniferous.

"Now some few — some very few — vegetable species have endured since that time."

"Ah!" I said. "You must mean the ginkgo!"

"I do not!" Mr. Secrett countered sharply. "That dates merely to the Permian. What I am actually referring to is the group collectively known as horsetails, or *Equisetaceae*. These are regarded as the type-plants of the age."

I subsided, making a firm resolution to keep my mouth shut.

"On the other hand — and this is what started Professor King on his train of reasoning — there are an amazingly large number of insect species which are virtually unchanged and abundant today: cockroaches, above all. Indeed, the Carboniferous sometimes bears the irreverent nickname Age of Cockroaches, because they were very numerous and can be used for dating.

"Why so few plants and relatively so many insects?

"The conventional explanation involves climatic change, and of course it is indisputable that during the orogenous period which occurred some two hundred and eighty million to two hundred and twenty million years ago the swamps in which Carboniferous flora flourished were converted into what are now coal seams and oil-bearing strata.

"But King came to the conclusion that there was another factor, a factor which accounted for the dominance of plants and the gigantism of so many insects *and* the improbable survival of numerous species of the latter when the whole character of terrestrial vegetation was radically changed. His argument proceeded along the following lines.

"Suppose, he postulated, that during the Carboniferous a great many species of plant preyed on animal life. Suppose that our contemporary sundew and Venus's-flytrap are pale shadows of ancestors which obliged those dragonflies to grow huger and huger for the simple sake of survival. Suppose that the thorns of roses and briars, the poison of nettles, the sweet and sticky exudations which trapped the flies sometimes found embalmed in amber are as nothing to the armory which vegetation commanded in the days when plants ruled the world.

"He had evidence for his notion — or at any rate, some. Most was scoffed at by his colleagues, for it involved a radical reinterpretation of certain structures in fossil plants which other people believed to have been satisfactorily accounted for long ago. But what he insisted on most strongly was a point which the majority of scientists would not regard as constituting any sort of proof, whereas he himself relied on it as a self-evident demonstration of unchallengeable facts.

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"In short, he maintained that the survival of all those insects was due to the disappearance of the plants which specifically preyed on them. More beer? I see there's just a drop left."

Accepting the flagon, I frowned. "That seems harmless enough," I said at length. "It's flimsy, but it doesn't exactly sound like the ravings of a lunatic."

Reclaiming the beer and draining the last of it, Mr. Secrett shook his head.

"If only he had limited himself to offering his idea for debate.... But he didn't. He reacted to well-intended criticism as though he had been kicked in a sensitive area. He declared flatly that he was going to make the whole world admit he was right. He resigned the posts he still held — as I recall, he was a full professor somewhere and a professor emeritus somewhere else — and retired here to write those very unscientific papers I already mentioned. Quite apart from libeling everybody else in his field, and sundry other people too, he went on to claim that he was busy demonstrating how plants not normally regarded as carnivorous could be conditioned into acting like those he believed to have inhabited the distant past."

For a long moment I sat stunned, thinking of the rabbit I had found less than an hour ago. Oblivious of my reaction, Mr. Secrett carried on.

"That was too much for the scientific community, as you might expect. From being respected, he became mocked. He was referred to as 'Old King Coal' and sometimes as 'Professor Kink.' In the end" — with a shrug — "he died and was buried here. That was in the autumn of '45."

"Here? You mean this is his tomb we're sitting on?" I twisted around, not having thought to read the inscription before.

"No, his grave is over that way." Mr. Secrett waved in approximately the direction I had come from. "Apparently he wanted not to be interred in consecrated ground, and at the time nobody had found a way of deconsecrating this graveyard, because the sect was of course extinct. As a matter of fact, I don't suppose it ever did get deconsecrated."

I pondered for a while and finally inquired, "How did you get involved? I think you said something about making a pilgrimage here. So I take it you were among King's few admirers?"

"Oh, not personally. I'd have been glad of a chance to meet him, though, because while I was abroad during the war, I ran across a collection of his early essays, published by the Freethinker's Library, which had a profound effect on me. As a writer he was scarcely in a class with Haldane or Russell, but coming from the background that I did, I found his speculations heady stuff, and as soon as I was demobbed, I made my way to Battlements determined to have audience of him.

"I was, of course, too late. Indeed, I arrived only in time to help with the melancholy business of clearing up the mess he had left his house in. His executor was a local solicitor, an elderly man, who was very glad of my assistance, and since no other disposition of his papers was indicated by King's will,

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he allowed me to retain some of the unpublished material as a souvenir. And most interesting it turned out to be.

"Consequently I've been coming here two or three times a year ever since, to check on developments. When I heard you cry out, I was just about to — I say, is anything the matter?"

My mouth had suddenly gone perfectly dry, and I'm sure the color had drained from my cheeks.

"What sort of developments?" I finally forced out.

Mr. Secrett gazed intently at the toe of his left boot.

"I neglected to mention the cause of Professor King's demise, did I not?"

"You know perfectly well you —! Excuse me. You have piqued my interest considerably, though."

"I expected to," said Mr. Secrett with complacence. "You and I share an interest in the marginalia of the dull everyday world.... Well, the doctor who attended him declined to issue a certificate; the coroner declined to record the verdict his jury reached at the inquest; and none of the local people, even now, will discuss the matter with outsiders. I've been a regular visitor for thirty years, and I've never been told how King died.

"But I have my suspicions, the result of reading his unpublished manuscripts. Shorn of their personal animosity, they turned out to be amazingly rational. And naturally, as soon as I learned one key fact — which was that despite war-time economy regulations he was buried in a coffin of solid oak in a grave lined with concrete and covered with a stone weighing a quarter of a ton — I came rushing back here to investigate. And made some very interesting discoveries. Very curious, too."

"Have you ever," I said slowly, not looking at him, "seen a rabbit half rotted away and yet so neatly posed in the middle of its run that from the back it might be taken for one caught in a snare last night — only there wasn't a snare, just ordinary-looking green stalks?"

"You've seen that? Where? You must show me at once!" Mr. Secrett leapt to his feet, snatching up his specimen box and camera.

"It was some distance beyond where you met me," I said, reluctant to face that tangled woodland again. "And I'm not sure I could find my way back to it —"

"Oh, *you* may get lost around here," he interrupted contemptuously, "but after thirty years I'm unlikely to. Bring your stick. If you mean the spot I think you mean, the undergrowth is particularly dense."

"You could say that twice," I muttered and resignedly accompanied him.

The rabbit was still there. Mr. Secrett dropped to one knee and inspected it from all angles, then glanced up with an accusing expression.

"You said it was 'posed,' didn't you?"

"I must have disturbed it as I passed," I excused myself half-truthfully.

"A pity. A great pity. Still, can't be helped." Focusing his camera, he shot three or four close-ups of it, then proceeded to drop samples of the nearest plants into test tubes, examining each with a magnifying glass.

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As he worked, he said, "And what are you going to do now, as a matter of interest? Hang about until it suits Mr. Casparole to come home?"

"I intended to," I said. "But now I know that Tower House is Battlements fallen on hard times, I don't think I could stand it. I'll have to go back and spend the night there, but tomorrow I'll take the earliest London train that my ticket is valid for."

"It must be a bitter disappointment," Mr. Secrett sighed. "I've never been able to understand people like that, who show absolutely no consideration. Their attitude transcends selfishness. It amounts to a total lack of empathy, which in my opinion is what makes human beings civilized...." Rummaging in a pocket, he produced a tiny trowel with which he delicately extracted one of the nearby plants, root and earth and all, and placed it in an oblong glass container with a lid, designed to fit the specimen case.

"Here," he said, proffering it. "A present for your Mr. Casparole. You said he likes being given things. You can return the box next time you call at the library. But do take care of it; this kit belonged to my grandfather."

Turning away to retrieve his camera, he added over his shoulder: "By the way, King's grave is about fifty yards to your right. I know, because when I first got into the habit of coming here, I used always to bring a bouquet of flowers to lay on it. I was a sentimental fellow in my youth. But it's been many years since I ventured closer to the site than where we're standing. Well! Let me show you the path which will take you back to Tower House."

"Just a second," I said, staring at the plant in the glass box, which to my untutored eye looked like any other of the miscellaneous weeds found all over Britain. "Are you hinting that it wasn't *just* King's body that was buried in this concrete-walled tomb?"

"Let's just say cremation would have been more efficacious," said Mr. Secrett, and he strode back towards the ruined chapel.

Shamefacedly — and inexpertly — I planted Mr. Secrett's present at one of the abominable dog's favorite peeing spots behind the house. And slept badly all night, for fear that Mr. Secrett might have led me up the garden path; how did I know whether, away from the sober setting of the RSAL Library, he might not go in for elaborate pranks?

Worse yet was the possibility that he might have told the sober truth.

Red-eyed, I went out early, intending to grub up the plant and throw it away. I was too late. Finding it was not impregnated with his odor, the dog had eaten *it*, thereby demonstrating that King's theory was far from watertight.

I wished the beast dyspepsia and went home.

Despite that fiasco, though, I still have to return Mr. Secrett's glass box. I hadn't meant to visit him again until it was positively unavoidable, but I suppose that moment has arrived earlier than I hoped. It's clear he must like me, and I imagine he likes rather few people. But whatever the honor of being on his short list, I'm not precisely overjoyed. Being liked by Mr. Secrett has its drawbacks.

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Brian Aldiss has done just about everything in this field, and done it extremely well. He is a short story writer ("Hothouse" series, Hugo award winner; "The Saliva Tree," Nebula award), novelist (Greybeard, Barefoot in the Head, Frankenstein Unbound, *among many others), critic* (*literary editor of* The Oxford Mail *for many years). More recently he has been a successful anthologist and written the best serious history of sf,* Billion Year Spree. *We are proud to offer a new Aldiss story.*

Three Ways

by BRIAN W. ALDISS

When a big fish dies and is beached in the shallows, belly-upwards, the minnows dart about it. Tremulously brave, appearing and disappearing, they approach the enormous carcass. They eat. More and more arrive upon the scene. The water teems with little greedy fish.

The *'Bathycosmos'* was all but home. It lay in the shallow of space, in a cis-lunar orbit about Earth where its gravitational pull could not disturb terrestrial tides. Little police flitters, media craft, supply torpedoes, cruise ships, military patrols, approached the gigantic research vessel as close as they dared. They drifted across the great cliff of hull, glittered in sunlight, disappeared into shadow, were gone. The *'Bathycosmos'* remained.

Despite its bulk, it was itself a fugitive thing.

Deck XLII, Section A. The photographers and spectrum-analysts had been roused from cryogenic sleep. They had undergone the rituals of exercise and dance, and had taken their first semi-liquid meal. Digestion began again, after many Earth years. They were feeling more like human beings, less like revenants.

Williamz, Premchard and Dale even managed to laugh again. The noises came out rusty and hollow and brave.

Williamz: "All right for you, Acharya, you're a lazy swob — you enjoy lying in bed."

Premchard: "Suppose you were right for a change, I still prefer a nice warm bed, not an ice box. Even fast asleep, I still missed my nap at midday."

Dale: "Directly we get down to ground, I'm heading for the nearest warm bed. With a woman in it — one at least, to ward off frost-bite."

They jumped about, chuckling at the sensible movements of their limbs.

Lucas Williamz was a small ageless

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man with a dapper dark beard which had faded slightly under the weight of icy light years. In repose, his face held melancholy, but he cultivated cheerfulness as an art. He put an arm about his friend A.V. Premchard and said, tenderly, "You'll soon be back in the squalor of your native village, Acharya. Better you than me."

Acharya Vinoba Premchard was a lightly built Hindu with a proud hook nose. He took life almost as seriously as he took photography. "And you, Lucas — back to the ascepsis of your flat in Bonn. Better you than me. Will you make another intergalactic journey, do you think?"

Jimmy Dale was a big man with heavy shoulders. He had been born in San Diego and had spent his childhood on the ocean. There was something solitary about him; he answered Premchard seriously, "I'd go out again if Doug Skolokov wanted me to. He's a good leader. You, Lucas?"

"Not flaming likely," Williamz said. "Once to the end of creation and back is enough. You Acharya?"

"We will see, we will see. In any case, why do not the ferries take us down to Earth?"

"You heard the announcement. A strike among the computer-operators at Port Authority. Some things never change, let the centuries do their damnedest..."

But some things did change. They were summoned for a rehabilitation briefing. As the two hundred men and women of Deck XLII, Section A, settled down, the big screen lit and a plain-faced woman, speaking from Earth, addressed them without preamble.

"Welcome home, travellers of the *'Bathycosmos.'* You will find your home planet in many ways the same as when you left it, for planets are slow to change. All the same, we think it helpful to advise you of certain aspects of life which are different from when you left. You and your ship are under the jurisdiction of Corporatia. We appreciate that you may have problems in adjusting to us and our social institutions, and intend to do all we can to assist you through the transitional period. When you reach ground, you will be dispersed according to your appropriate demographic area."

A slight movement which could be interpreted as unease rippled through the audience. Premchard raised an eyebrow interrogatively at Williamz. The woman on the screen continued to look pleasant but firm. Her eyes regarded them all.

"First, you will be glad to know that the Great Ice Age is abating. The average temperature in the Northern Hemisphere is two degrees warmer than when you left. The North American continent and much of Asia are now clear of glaciers up to a latitude of approximately forty degrees and Western Europe to fifty-two degrees. Cargo ships can again sail round the tip of South America, or through the English Channel. Many of the large centres of civilization have plans to re-occupy surface sites, while the Third World — which of course has been less severely affected by the centuries of cold — reports considerable immigration to non-equatorial zones."

Her words had come voice-over. On

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the screen, images gave flesh to her sentences. Satellite shots showed the greyish white mantle receeding from Peking and the ruins of New York. Gigantic slabs of ice launched themselves off the Irish Coast. In underground caverns, walls of metal glowed and came thunderously together. In a haze of golden dusty sunset, whites and blacks jostled in Central Africa for a northbound train.

"Climatic disturbances have inevitably been followed by civil disturbances. These have been quelled often with considerable loss of life. Severe curtailments of individual liberty have been necessary in the public interest. You will be issued with regulations on your return to your several countries, and we advise you to familiarise yourself with them as soon as possible. As you will discover, it has been necessary to introduce capital punishment for a number of offences. Restrictions will be lifted as soon as the emergency is over.

"Owing to the severe climatic conditions which have dominated Earth ever since the *'Bathycosmos'* left, national frontiers have markedly changed. We have suffered two large-scale nuclear wars in the interim. The Advanced countries have been the chief victims."

The audience was now standing; individuals cried out in anguish as they viewed the screen. Rioting, violent clashes between civilians and fleet armoured vehicles, fire-cannon shooting down vast underground streets, tanks shovelling aside bodies, rocketships plunging like daggers into the lunar crust, heads flying from bodies under the sweep of a machine with horizontal blades, lines of missiles darkening a china-blue sky — these images and more conveyed a magnitude of terror the woman's voice tidily concealed.

Nuclear explosions billowed outwards, rising on savage thunder, reduplicating and reduplicating their thunder, climbing to the clouds, setting the clouds boiling, turning cities to charred feathers. Metal men marched, storming down tunnels to subterranean cities. Corpses lay rigid for one last military inspection. A man with a clip board shouted wordlessly. People with prosthetic limbs attempted some kind of reconstruction. Men stood in queues or lay in hospital beds, faces armoured in pale smiles for the camera.

"You may find your own country has disappeared or has been entirely reorganised. In the common interest, there are now only five demographic areas or countries. These are Corporatia, Socdemaria, Communia, Neutralia, and Third World, the divisions being for the most part ideological. This may sound confusing but, as soon as you land on Earth, officials from the Demographical Centre will meet you and try to allocate you to your native area, if it still exists, and to the descendants of your family, if that exists. Never fear, we shall see that you re-adjust. Meanwhile, welcome back to Earth! Welcome to Corporatia."

In forty-eight hours, the strike was over. The rumour aboard the *'Bathycosmos'* was that the strikers had been shot before a firing squad.

As they travelled down to the landing site in a ferry, jostled on all sides by other members of the research vessel,

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Premchard said, "Now we feel glad we signed on. We certainly had the best of the bargain — ten years orderly scientific life for us, one hundred and twenty years of disorderly recession for Earth..."

"That's relativity in a nutshell," said Jimmy Dale.

"I'm sure your great-great-grandson will be pleased to see you, Lucas, even if your Western ideas of progress have taken a hard knock."

Williamz laughed. "You Hindus, with all your flaming black gods, years and generations mean nothing to you."

They bounced in their upright cradles as the ground rushed to meet them.

"Tell me, Williamz, you racist bastard, why are you so down on Hinduism, just because it's so reactionary?"

"I'd slosh you one, Acharya, if I could get out of this harness. If you must know, though I'm of Australian stock, my maternal grandmother was a Bengali. So I take a sort of family interest in your Indian idiocies."

"Not India any longer — Third World. Not Australia, either — a subdepartment of Neutralia. So stuff that up your billabong, chum!"

They were down. Low grey buildings raced by. A glimpse of distant ice. The mouth of a great hangar into which they rolled. Darkness. Then lights, loudspeakers, grey-clad officials proceeding towards the craft.

A.V. Premchard found himself afflicted by an extreme form of agoraphobia when he left the shelter of the ferry. The outside world rendered him absolutely catatonic; he had forgotten how everything moved outdoors, how uncertain perspective was. He had forgotten such problems as irregularities underfoot, winds that blew, temperatures that changed. The meaningless blue of the sky terrified him — never had he seen such an intense, unnatural color.

Even inside, matters were little better. He had forgotten that rooms had windows, that people shouted and came and went meaninglessly, that corridors had ugly angles. He had forgotten how to negotiate stairs. Even doors were not as they had been on the *'Bathycosmos;'* on Earth they tended to slither away as you reached to grasp them.

People shouted. Methods of address had changed.

He tried to curl up in an armchair. Armchairs had changed.

He spent two days being examined and interrogated and filling in forms. To add to his disorientation, he could not make out where exactly on the globe he was. He was in Corporatia City, but that told him little. He knew he was in Corporatia because the flag, a melancholy affair of white and grey with a red fist rampant, flew everywhere. He was not sure where Corporatia was. It looked like Greenland but could have been Los Angeles or Milan. He met only women, women clad in grey shapeless uniforms.

On his third day — the authorities had installed him in a singularly noisy hotel, The Syringe, ten floors underground — he found that it was no fun being a Hindu in Corporatia. Corporatia was at war with the Third World. Well, not actually at war. But there were hostilities. A frontier was under

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dispute. His beloved India was still somewhere in existence, but now called Hindustania; there was a fashion in Corporatia to refer to the Third World as Anarchania. As far as Premchard could ascertain, chaos was the order of the day there; terrorism and destruction were rife. Corporatia was eager to take over Anarchania, to protect it from the evils of Communia.

"For you, Premchard, bestest advisement is become of Corporatia citizenship, third grade with skin allowance, forget terrestriality at odds."

The language was difficult to understand.

Premchard stuck to his metaphorical guns, occasionally waving his star contract in a minor official's face or in the eye of a computer. It was explained to him that his contract was one hundred and twenty years old and made with dead officialdom in a dead land. He explained that the insurance covered all such eventualities, secure in the knowledge that several hundred fellow crewmen of the *'Bathycosmos'* were explaining precisely the same point in other sordid little offices.

On the evening of the third day, they conceded that it was possible for him to draw a certain sum of money due to him after his long service — not the fortune he expected because, owing to successive devaluations and continual inflation, the *groatime* was now at a new all-time low.

He took what they paid him, staring with some nausea at the face of the woman on the plastic *groatime* note. Presidess Wjeilljer.

The authorities also conceded that it was possible, despite everything, to travel to Anarchania, were he fool enough to wish to go. Once he was there, he would no longer be a government responsibility. He signed a form to that effect, checked out of The Syringe — yes, with regret in face of the new challenges — and caught something called a hedgecar, powered by human wastes.

"Oh, Kancharapara!" said A.V. Premchard to himself. He tried to avoid imagining what terrible forms of progress might have overtaken his native village of Kancharapara, lost somewhere in the wilds of — what was that again? — oh, yes, Anarchania...

Lucas Williamz discovered that he was afflicted by a virulent form of agoraphobia immediately he left the ferry. He tripped and fell on the naked ground, and could hardly bring himself to get up. He had forgotten the awful randomness of outside, the beastly irregularities underfoot, the temperatures that changed, the winds that blew. He had forgotten the horror of trees, the nastiness of bushes, the weird geometries of buildings designed for exposure to atmosphere. He had forgotten noise and violent motion and the stark idiocy of a blue sky overhead.

He ran trembling into the shelter of the nearest building. Little reassurance was to be found there. The rooms had doors that slithered away when you attempted to reach them and windows that revealed the unstable atmosphere — *clouds!* — beyond. He no longer knew how to negotiate stairs; he hated the ugly angles of corridors, the stench of public rooms, the grotesque people who walked clumsily, shouted, and

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made meaningless journeys to and fro. He had forgotten the crowds.

He was terrified of strangers. They talked in a funny way. They looked at him in a funny way. He hated the official portraits of Presidess Wjeilljer.

He tried to curl up in an armchair, but armchairs had changed.

The authorities installed Williamz in a ghastly hotel called The Antidote where, to his alarm, he was given a room two stories above ground level. He could not sleep. He drank, but alcohol did not agree with him. He spent two days being examined and interrogated. He filled in many forms.

To add to his depression, he was unable to discover where he was. He knew he was in Corporatia City, the capital of Corporatia; the Corporatia flag, a dreary white and grey affair sporting a clenched fist, flew everywhere — more proof of the unstable atmosphere. Unfortunately, he was not sure where Corporatia was. It looked like Iceland, but it could well have been Berlin or Toronto.

His applications to be returned to his home in Melbourne, Australia, were answered on the third day. Williamz was informed that Melbourne was a city in Neutralia, and that Corporatia was in a state of hostility with Neutralia. He would be returned on a prison posting. He had half an hour to pack.

He was ready in twenty-one minutes.

He said to the official who collected him, "Things seem pretty bad here, don't they?"

"You're a criticism-issuer? You should have achieved deadness last century, so belt it," she said. She began methodically to confiscate valuable items in his luggage.

Jimmy Dale also was struck by galloping agoraphobia. An armoured car took him to a hotel called The Arena and left him there. He climbed on his bed and lay thinking about the great drunken celebration he had planned with his mates on the *'Bathycosmos.'* He spent all the next morning filling in forms and the afternoon back on the bed, watching holovision. There were only two channels. Both showed a good deal of Presidess Wjeilljer.

He brightened up when a news show came on at six o'clock and there was Commander Doug Skolokov, captain of the *'Bathycosmos,'* being interviewed by an intellectual-looking young lady dressed in a kind of sack.

"Tell me, do you have a pleasure be back on Earth, Commander?"

"It's obviously going to take a little time to adjust — there have been big changes — but yes, sure we're glad to be home. Ten years is a long while."

"Yep, one hundred and twenty years long. Family's of you dispersed, making death-time over generations, haven't you just hit the obsolete situation now on a redundancy interface with the Great Now?"

The Commander smiled determinedly at his interrogator.

"We are not redundant. The world always needs brave men. We return from a successful mission as planned, bringing a tremendous store of vital knowledge to the world. We have spoken with the quasars. Knowledge can never be irrelevant. You appreciate that."

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"Appreciation depreciation. Culture-of-you knowledge is gone by for us. Now's Great Now in Corporatia with past culture knowledge banned, obsolete, death-time stuff, I must express. Satisfaction of Citizeness Law, statutory."

"Do I understand you to say—"

"Yep, speechway of you also hits the redundancy interface, Commander, thanks, many problems for brave boys of you from defunct epoch. Nighty!"

Cut. A Govment Bond Marvels the Mond.

Presidess Bonds with her stress.

Dale switched off and lay in an anguished torpor.

Through him ran the fear of extinction. He wanted a woman. It occurred to him that he had seen only women since leaving the ferry. All the officials had been women, the reception staff at The Arena were women — but all uniformed and so plain and drab that they hardly counted as women. Not the sort of women Dale needed.

He staggered out, fighting back agorophobia. The streets were deserted. It was almost dark. Automobiles drove on whichever side of the road they felt like, moving slowly, hooting as they went. Dale kept to the sidewalk, hugging the buildings, feeling a fugitive.

After a quarter-hour's walking, he found a bar. One hunched figure clutched a glass in the semi-darkness; otherwise the dump was deserted.

Dale ordered a beer. "Can I get a woman round here, barman?"

"What category freak, you, Les?"

He looked again. The barman was a woman. "Sorry, I wasn't thinking."

"You not from Corporatia? What category freak woman?"

"No, no, I'm not a woman, I'm a man. Look, my identity card — Jimmy Dale. What's happened to all the men?"

The woman laughed. "Who needs men? Satisfaction beats the faction."

The figure at the other end of the bar lumbered over. It was a gigantic woman with drooping jaws and fangs, looking rather like a bulldog.

"You some death-time fag libbed from that antique starboat, baby?"

"Yeah, yeah, where are all the men, that's all I asked?" He stood up for safety, confronting her jowls.

"Masck war-makers, we carcerate the father-lovin' lot, Les!" As the bulldog-like woman spoke, she reached out a gigantic mit. Dale struck her hand down. With a deftness at total variance with her cumbersome bulk, the woman kicked him just under the kneecap.

Dale knew how to handle himself. Instinct made him duck in pain, but he seized the opportunity to butt her in the great expanse of her stomach and jab two fingers hard into the region of her kidneys.

She let out a sound like a fast-boiling kettle and he ran limping from the bar. A nation of degraded women — was it possible? He shuddered with an emotion between shame and horror.

Best to limp for home. Before he could get back to The Arena, the police picked him up. A tough woman with a small moustache pinned him to the wall and looked at his identity card.

"You nascent San Diego, Bert?"

"You can read."

"I scan, you divvy, Masck. Antique two-sex union?"

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"Jesus Christ."

"In the car. Some Guck non-additional ovdeh re detail of you."

"I've done nothing, officer, what've I done?"

She looked threatening and her mates moved nearer. "In the car, Bert. No voking. You nascent San Diego, where's now part Communia. We hoot you down the station for an enemy spy."

They started beating him up as soon as they had him in the back seat.

Allahcutta was an enormous city straddling the Ganges. Its streets were choked with people, its buildings overflowed with them. From every open window, faces gaped or washing hung. People squatted or slept on steps, on the roofs of bus shelters, on slow-moving vehicles. The gravy-coloured river was covered with boats and rafts and rubbish. Heat and stink rose from the city with a resonance matched only by its febrile noise.

A.V. Premchard found himself confronting a reasonably helpful rehabilitation officer whose English he could understand. The interview was conducted in the corner of a high-ceilinged room which had once been the linen-room of a hotel.

"My wish is simply to return to my village and remain there while I consult the records and discover what has been happening since I left Earth." He controlled his breathing to retain his calm.

"Yes, yes, very creditable, Mr. Premchard, but naturally past history is not so very popular — not, not actually illegal, you understand — but we must look always to the future. In that way, we protect the citizen."

"Corporatia was so very horrid." He was too polite to mention that he found his own country — well, this country — also very horrid. The very room they were in stifled him. Other supplicants sat before other desks, behind which clerks fidgeted amid their flimsy fortifications of paper and hardware. One supplicant had brought in two hens in a basket; perhaps the birds were to be offered as a bribe. "Has the world been overcome by idealogy? I wish to enquire about such things."

"You see, Mr. Premchard, it's a process, a due process. You must cultivate an understanding, you see." The man spread his hands in a dispirited gesture.

Premchard was too listless to ask what process. Mistaking his listlessness for doubt, the officer said, "I might as well ask you what is the purpose of the universe. It's a silly question." He shook his head sorrowing at its silliness.

"No, not at all. That is a vital question. Once we cease to be interested in the answer to such questions, our spiritual life is dead." He actually found himself banging his fist on the desk. The desk trembled and people looked round at him. "Let me add that I have been into the universe — yes, the great universe itself." Premchard was overcome by how far the universe seemed from this stuffy little room. "I could give you a glimpse of that magnificence by telling you that the purpose of the universe is growth, expansion. Growth is its purpose, as spiritual growth is the purpose of the human spirit. Can you understand that?"

The official sat looking at him with-

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out answering, or even appearing to search in his mind for an answer. An official at the next desk got up and went to one of the enormously tall cupboards which filled the wall-space. Premchard saw, as the man withdrew a form-pad, that the cupboard was filled mainly with the relics of yesterday, a happier era: old plumes, turbans, drums, bugles, sashes, sheets, petticoats, white satin sandals, blankets impeccably folded, old flaccid white dress-waistcoats, cummerbunds wrinkling like yards of tripe, speckled mosquito nets, all pressed together in a kind of flock compost.

"Now as for the matter of Kancharapara," said the official at last, ignoring Premchard's last remark. "Your village is only five hundred kilometres distant, so perhaps you can walk to it. Transportation has an immense scarcity. On the other hand, perhaps you could attempt in the city to place a mortgage on a donkey or similar quadruped. Then you would be there more promptly. Good-day."

It was a kind of train. Sometimes it attached a snowplough to itself. Sometimes it left the rails and put on caterpillar tracks.

Only rarely did it stop at a station. It stopped in the sidings or else in open country. It shunned centres of population because it was a prison train and because it stank; the two qualities were complementary.

Williamz lay in one of the trucks with twenty other villainous-looking men. They were clad in rags and filth and they stole every possession he had. He hated and feared them, lying by himself in one corner as the axle rattled hard beneath his shoulder. It was dark on the truck, dark and cold except when — twice a day most days, the grille opened and the guards who travelled with the train flung in the rations.

As the days went by, Williamz adjusted to the company. He came to realize, as have others in the long history of persecution, that the finest and most independent minds are to be found in totalitarian prisons. He listened to their talk. He ceased to despair; he joined in the conversations. He learned.

And they were eager to learn from him. To them, Williamz was a freak, an aboriginee great-grandfather or great-great-grandfather who had outlived his age; but he was a miraculous freak, and they listened more eagerly to his tales of a forgotten Earth than to his story of exploration on the *'Bathycosmos.'* They called him The Miracle.

There was time enough on the train. Time for all history. At one point they were shunted on to a ship. Whiffs of a great ocean came to them. They endured a month at sea. Then they travelled overland. According to the best informed prisoners, they had sailed from what had been the U.S.A. to what had been Europe, and from what had been a Spanish port they travelled the immense journey overland to what had been Williamz' native land of Australia. Men died in the truck, villains and heroes, two a week on the average.

Yet they exulted. They were leaving Corporatia. After the last nuclear war, the women of Corporatia had risen in revolution and killed most of the remaining men. Women had never ruled a modern state; they learned realpolitik the hard way. For some centuries, men would be better off outside the hated

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frontiers of Corporatia.

"Still, women are part of mankind," Williamz said, recalling a woman he had loved more than a century ago.

"Ideology," growled one of his new friends. "It's a virus. The world is dying of it."

With a nail, they tried to draw Miracle Williamz a map of the new world. Enormous ice movements had hammered out new shapes from the yielding continents. To counterbalance gigantic depressions elsewhere, a plate had risen from the ocean east of Australia revealing a new land — Zealandia — almost the area of Australia. It stretched from the New Zealand islands in the south almost to the Ellis Islands in the north. In these pristine lands, the old drama of exploration and settlement was being re-enacted. New legends were being born from the territories.

To this new world, many of the prisoners dreamed of escaping.

They thought it could never happen, but the time came when the train stopped for longer than usual. The rations stopped too. The Corporatia guards, women all, were going home. The frontier had been reached.

Neutralia took control of the train. First came light, then soup, then bread, then hot water. The train pulled into a small township. The sick were removed from the trucks and carted off to die or recover, according to temperament. Showers, rudimentary clothes, were provided. Everyone wept or embraced. The journey continued.

The day dawned when they arrived at New Sydney. Then the endless form-filling and interviews began again. The most frugal accommodation seemed luxury. They wept, laughed, scratched.

One afternoon, Miracle Williamz was at last free to take himself off to a hostel and draw some pay, provided he reported to the Aliens Bureau every morning at nine. He thumbed a lift to the bay and hired a horse.

He mounted the horse and rode to the beach. Sand stretched before him, sand and water and sky. The months of incarceration in the prison train had cured his agoraphobia; all he wanted was space — the spaces of Earth. He set stirrup into flank. The horse began to move.

Along the great strip of the beach they galloped. Far across the water he could see land, a bar on the horizon which represented the great new territories of Zealandia, a raw small continent the size of old Australia. They had told him: white settlers were already there, hewing out fresh homesteads, driving in sheep and camels and cattle. He rode the faster. The waves crashed on the shore.

He yelled as he rode. He pulled his clothes off, stuffing them under the saddle, rejoicing in the fresh chill. Yelling, he spurred the mare into the waves. When she would go no farther, he flung himself from her back into the water.

Ocean burst over his head. Miracle Williamz rose, gasping. It was bloody cold. He struck out, frightened, elated. At last the synthetic tang of the ship and the stink of the prison train were voided from his nostrils.

Only when he was exhausted did he

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swim ashore to where the mare stood tossing her mane upon the barren sand.

Commander Doug Skolokov said to his three female interrogators, "You have threatened me with torture and death. You must do what you will with me. My only concern is not for myself but for the men who are in my command and for the knowledge I have brought back with me."

"We have explained," said the chief interrogator, a woman called Brady, "that your knowledge is obsolete or, at best, irrelevant. As for your men, they will be employed as we see fit. We are not savages."

Brady had learnt to speak an archaic version of English Skolokov could readily understand. The trick made him think her civilized, so he tried another appeal to her conscience.

"Then behave like civilized beings. In the West, science and the individual have been respected for many centuries — that respect has made the West great. I demand a full accounting of all the men on the *'Bathycosmos!'*"

"You cannot demand. So much you and the others must learn before you have a place in our society. *'Times have changed.'* Did they have that saying in your bygone day? To guard the things you profess to admire, we have to be vigilant. Men had gone mad. They would not give up war. Wasn't war the third thing that made the West great? We want no part of it. In Corporatia we live on the verge of disaster, threatened by climate and enemies — and those enemies are men. We are prepared to give you free passage to any enemy male country you name, as an expression of our leniency."

"This is my country. Or it was."

Brady got up and lit a thin white stick which she stuck in her mouth. "It was and it isn't any longer. But you will never accept that, will you?"

He hung his head, sick with weariness. They always woke him and brought him here at an ill hour. As far as he could tell, he was incarcerated far below the surface of the world. And they were burying him under a hostile ideology.

"You have to be vigilant, you say. The science we brought back from the universe might help you be strong."

Brady coughed and fanned smoke from her mouth. "Oh, yes, we know that view of science. Science is never neutral, always an ultimate instrument of death in the hands of men. Skolokov, we are going to have to teach you and your men — those who still remain in Corporatia — to think like women. Guard, take him away!"

By the side of the track, white flowers grew in the grass. Bees bumbled from blossom to blossom, burying their shoulders in dusty stamens. A patrolling hornet swooped in occasionally, seized a bee about its powdered middle, and headed away without pause for its nest.

The track led slowly uphill, mile after mile. The jungle grew nearer the track. The trees stood stiff and lifeless, awaiting the monsoon. A.V. Premchard moved at a measured pace, letting the sweat run from his brow and face on to his shirt. A pack, containing his worldly possessions, cut into his shoulders.

He heard a train ahead and, a quar-

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ter of an hour later, crossed a single pair of rails. The rails shone and hummed in the heat. He gained the top of the sharp rise which lay beyond the railway, and rested himself against an aged banyan. Ahead of him, on lower ground, stood Kancharapara. From reed-beds rushes grew tall and brittle, their tattered flags reaching almost to the eaves of the outlying bashas. To one side of the reed-beds, boys shouted as they bathed their water buffaloes in the village pond. Everything seemed as he remembered it.

An old man approached Premchard. His head was shaven and he walked with a stick. Premchard greeted him politely.

"This is Kancharapara? I can scarcely believe it. I was born in this very place, and have been away too long."

"Life is hard, in Kancharapara as elsewhere. I see by your face that you have some deep trouble, young sir."

"No, you're mistaken, old fellow. Not really trouble. Knowledge. Knowledge sets you apart."

Silence fell between them and the tree shaded them. At length, the old man said, "In Kancharapara, nobody is alone. The gods are close to Kancharapara. Although the gods are sometimes harsh to us, they keep us together as a family. I will walk with you to see Mr. Shantaram, the chief landowner, for I know it inwardly that you will find peace there."

Peace! thought Premchard to himself. This Hindu obsession with peace! How he admired it, and in truth peace he wanted himself, yet the idea was based on a mistaken cosmology. With three hundred and thirty million gods, Hinduism had no room for facts, and the fact was that all the human dramas of Earth took place within a context of the violent explosion of the universe. Suppose he told this man that all organic life was simply a side-effect of that primal explosion which set the universe in being, that there was only the explosion, and that anyone who went in quest of peace or stability in the midst of an explosion was mad?

He blinked his eyes and listened to the bees and the cries of the boys in the pool, and could scarcely credit his thoughts. He had a pang of longing for Dale and Williamz; they would understand. If he were to live here in this village, he must remain mute about his knowledge.

So all he said to the old man, mildly, was, "I am pleased to learn that I shall find peace here, but how do you happen to know that?"

The old man nodded his head, starting down the worn path to the village before replying.

"Because I am an old man and know all who were born here. You I have never seen before. Therefore if you are forced to claim that you were born here, the place holds something for you that you need. If you need it, so you will receive."

Premchard looked up at the hazy sky as he followed down into the village. Everyone on Earth was blind and didn't know it. Yet, in their darkness, some had developed second sight.

The bed was disordered, its bottom sheet rumpled and stained. It stood in a neat suburban bungalow. It was owned

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by a man called Moresby at present on relief work in the Dividers. Williamz had been in and on the bed with Mirindah Moresby almost non-stop for forty-eight hours. He looked back at the bed as he left the room, then passed out of the house and out of Mirindah's life, walking downtown like a man refreshed.

At the Zealandia Office, he spoke to a small grey bespectacled female clerk who made him welcome and said, "You have only to fill in this form, Mr. Williamz, and you get a pass to visit the new territory of Zealandia for five years. The Neutralian government will book you a passage over on a government ship and pay that passage, and give you a grant of one hundred fifty greens beside. Neutralia has been badly hit over the last century by one natural disaster after another, and resources are low. Now that things are looking up, we claim Zealandia as a colony, and we want it developed as fast as possible."

"Things are looking up, are they?"

"Inbloodydubitably," said the small grey bespectacled lady.

Sighing, Williamz looked at the form and started to fill it in. Every now and again, he consulted with the clerk. It took him an hour and twenty minutes to answer the questions. The clerk accepted the form and posted it through a slot.

After another ten minutes had passed, a big man in a khaki shirt appeared and took Williamz into a side office.

"Your application for a passage to the New Territories is turned down. I wonder you bothered applying."

"What you mean? What's wrong?" Williamz asked, straightening up and looking belligerent.

"You know what I mean." Belligerence returned.

"I don't or I wouldn't ask."

The big man put a big finger on Section 4A of the form Williamz had filled in. "Maternal Grandmother. Nationality. You put Bengali. Right or wrong?"

"Right, of course. Why should I lie? The old lady's been dead for the best part of a century and a half... You're not objecting to my age, are you?"

The big man grew red about the chops. "Are you so thick you need it spelled out, Chuck? You've got coloured blood only a couple of generations back, so you aren't eligible for a passage. There's a Whites Only policy in Zealandia, as if you didn't know it. Scarper, pronto."

When he left the building, Williamz headed straight for some of the friends he had made on the prison train. They listened in sympathy, though not without chuckling.

"Did you think that kind of prejudice would die out just because you've been away for a few years, Miracle? Prejudice is basic — which is why those of us who suffered at the hands of Corporatia stick together. Welcome to the club. Of course we'll get you across to Zealandia. You'll make your fortune there in six years, if you don't get killed first."

Williamz looked at his knuckles. "All the while I was away, I just wanted to get home. Now I'm here, and it isn't the same."

"You've got to keep moving on," they said.

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They offered him a drink. "What's this new place like?" he asked.

"What you might expect. Raw, unformed, just risen fresh out of the sea, pretty near three million square miles — say about the size of Australia or the old U.S.A. The rawest wilderness man ever confronted. Two things in particular you need to take with you if you intend staying."

"What are they?"

"Why, a rifle and a woman, what else?"

The airship *'Trader Morn'* flew steadily on a north-west bearing, heading for the settlement of Capricorn. It passed over the magnificent Three Kings waterfall, lost in its own spray, through which tumbled the remains of deep ocean still trapped in the centre of the new continent. It passed over that misplaced ocean itself, laconically christened Three Kings Water. It passed over what had been the deep-drowned bed of the Pacific and was now raw earth. It arrived above Capricorn Broads.

Sundown was at hand. Constant volcanic activity in Zealandia brought sunsets of peculiar brilliance, unmatched anywhere in the world. Crimson and carmine and orange and heliotrope flashed among the piling cloud along the western rim of the world as the airship circled. The craft disturbed thousands of flamingo feeding in shallow water. They rose, taking to pink wing, thundering overhead as the ship sank almost noiselessly on the airfield beside the lakes.

Three men climbed down from the airship. Two of them were dressed in the rough fashion of Zealandia traders, in silvered plastic tunics and pants, decorated with patches, tassels and plumes. The third man was tall, slightly stooped, and greying at the temples; he wore a kind of shabby uniform, with a gun strapped to his shining leather belt.

"Where's Williamz?" he asked the others. "Which way?"

One of the traders caught a light satchel thrown down from the airship and said, "He'll be in the village. Anyone will tell us. We have to satisfy these guards first."

He indicated two guards approaching. One guard stood back and covered them with a laser; the other came forward and said, "Who are you and what you want? Have you a permit to sit that thing down in our territory?"

"Where did they dig you up from?" asked the trader. "My name's McFee and this is my oppo, Flanagan, and we look in on Miracle every four months or so. What are you all wound up about? War on or something?"

The guard chewed things over before replying, and said in a reasonable tone, "You guessed it. There is a war on, and it ain't a joke, either. This is Miracle Land and that's Herbert's Land over the water. They're enemies of ours and we're enemies of theirs. If you ain't from Herbert, I'll take you to Miracle, Mr. McFee."

Capricorn was a drab settlement, its houses and offices built from pre-fabricated sections made in the new continent's manufacturing area in the south-east, which had once comprised the islands of New Zealand. On Capricorn's low roofs, solar panels gleamed in the last of the sunlight. The only things to

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relieve its insignificance were plantations of young eucalyptus and palm trees behind the town, and the dark snouts of a volcanic chain behind the trees.

As they walked down what passed for a street, they saw a few groundeffect vehicles moving slowly. The population was predominantly male. Some men rode horses and a group of four drove before them a herd of goats no bigger than cats.

The guard dropped McFee's party at a low bulding which called itself a hotel, promising to fetch Miracle if he was available.

"Let's go in and get a drink, then," said McFee to his two companions.

"This seems a pretty rough place," the tall man in uniform remarked as they made their way into the bar.

"Many a worser place out this way," said Flanagan, and ordered three beers.

"Yes, but calling a feud across a lake a war..."

"That's politics. Increases a man's dignity."

The glasses were bucket-sized. Flanagan and McFee flung down two apiece before the man in uniform had finished his. They were about to order more when a messenger arrived to announce that Miracle would see them.

Miracle Williamz sat in a chair in a plain room over the bank. He rose to greet them as they entered.

He had spent ten years in the new lands. His space pallor was gone, baked into a brick red by the sun swinging above Capricorn, the latitude of the township. His hair was thinning on top and, like his uniformed visitor's, greyed about the temples. He had become thickest, and his beard straggled. He no longer smiled as readily as he had done, and his look was strictly evaluative as he fixed it on his visitors.

McFee came forward, shook Williamz' hand, and slapped his satchel down on the desk.

"There's your mail from the mainland, Mr. Miracle, and the *'Trader Morn'* is out on your strip, loaded with the things you ordered."

"Have you brought the seed, McFee?" Miracle's voice rasped.

"Every gram of it. Every gram you ordered. I fetched it from the Brisbane Horticultural Unit myself."

Miracle nodded curtly, dismissing that subject as if satisfied while he set his scrutiny on the uniformed man.

"And who might you be? You're no trader. You're not government, are you? Because if so I'm the only government here. This is my town, Capricorn."

"So I gather, Williamz, and the territory all round for a considerable distance."

"I'm called Miracle now. Not Williamz. I'm a Zealandian. I asked you who you were."

The uniformed man smiled. "After more than a decade, why should you recognise me? I was your skipper on the *'Bathycosmos,'* Williamz. My name is Doug Skolokov. These gentlemen gave me a passage from Old Sydney."

Miracle walked in front of the uniformed man, scowling, finally grinning and setting his fists on his hips.

"Commander Skolokov. So it is! I'd even managed to forget the *'Bathycosmos,'* never mind you. Welcome to my

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domain." He did not offer his hand, and still regarded the other closely as if expecting a hostile move.

"I'm pleased to have found you," said Skolokov. "You seem to have fared better in the intervening years than I have. Can I take you somewhere and buy you a drink to celebrate?"

There was one window in the room, through which the sky now showed the blue of night. Williamz walked over to the window and turned about.

"McFee, Flanagan, be my guests for the night. Settle yourselves comfortably in the hotel and get yourselves drunk. Bill me. Right now, I want a private talk with Commander Skolokov."

Having spoken, he stood unmoving. McFee and Flanagan looked at each other and left, clearly displeased with this summary treatment. The door closed behind them and Miracle and Skolokov confronted each other.

"So it's still *Commander* Skolokov, after all these years..."

"I told you my name was Doug Skolokov. I said nothing about the Commander bit."

"Hmm." Miracle rubbed his nose and crossed to a cupboard. "I've a lady waiting for me, Commander, and little enough time to spare for you, but maybe we'll take a drink before we part."

Glasses and a bottle appeared. They sat down facing each other.

"Just a few years ago, this spot was three thousand meters under water. We're sitting on top of millions of years of oceanic bottom sludge. When we have shovelled out the salts, it's going to grow the most fantastic crops of new foodstuffs the world has seen since Eden. Isn't that something greater than all space, than all those light-years we travelled?"

Skolokov shook his head, smiling. "Not for me it isn't. A whole part of me never came back from out there. A whole part of me is still communicating with the quasars."

Williamz hunched his shoulders, drank, said nothing. A silence opened. Skolokov broke it, speaking rather hastily.

"Well, things have worked out well for you on Earth, I can see that. I ended up in a Corporatia prison. The women aren't so hostile now, they've settled down as the years have gone by, as I always knew they would. I admire them. I've come to terms with them. They're taking a new interest in technology, now that Communia is getting back into space, and we're planning —"

Miracle made a sharp horizontal cutting movement with his hand across the desk. "Save the news, Commander. I've forgotten all that. Couldn't care a cuss. Let the big nations slug it out. They're done for if they but knew it. The future's right here, here where I stand. New nations are being born. Energy... Raw energy, right here... I plan that we'll unite with Herbert's Land — it's Herbert's daughter I'm just going to see, fine tough girl — and we'll fight the Fiji nation on our northern frontier. This is where life expands, not in space. I was in space, remember — in a flying prison."

Skolokov blinked, but said calmly, "New nations, old stale thoughts. How will your feud with Herbert look to history? It's in space that new philosophies, new systems of thought are born.

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The government of Corporatia is building a new ship, *'Bathycosmos II,'* going farther and faster than our old ship, and I'm to command it."

Emptying his glass, Miracle said, "Good luck." He looked angry, unused to men who contradicted him.

More silence.

Sighing, Skolokov emptied his glass and stood up. "I'll be going."

Miracle jumped up, red in the face. "Is that what you came here for, what you wasted your time for? A free drink? Couldn't you have saved us both the trouble?"

Skolokov looked him in the eyes.

"I came to ask you a question, but you've already answered it."

"Okay, then you ask it now."

"I've demanded and got permission from my government to take a certain quota of experienced men into deep space. We'll be away nearly three hundred terrestrial years this time. I wanted you along as chief photographer. It was your fine visual record as much as anything that convinced the women of Corporatia, including the Presidess, of the necessity for another voyage."

Miracle smote his forehead. "Holy goats, you're mad, Commander. Leave all this that I've built, that I've fought for?"

"I said, you have already answered my question."

When he was alone again, Miracle paced about the room, muttering to himself. After a while, he stood in the middle of the floor, staring blankly ahead. He looked at his hands, which shook. "Three hundred years..." he said aloud.

The satchel caught his eye. Automatically, he went forward and opened it, spilling envelopes on the table. He sorted them through. One bore an Anarchia franking.

He sat heavily at the table and slit open the foil with his thumb. Pulling a single sheet of paper out, he began to read.

Dear Lucas:

After four year's pause, I try again to see if a letter will reach you, my old friend. Perhaps by now you have forgotten your Indian pal Acharya, but I still recollect you vividly and wish for your company.

Life in the world is very terrible and so I think it will always be until men cultivate the eternal side of their nature. I am living in my native village of Kancharapara as if I had never been away, yet the years of space claim something of my being.

My great-great-grandson, Sunil, and his family look after me. I want very little. I need only the porch of their house, where I sit all day, meditating or speaking with the villagers when they need advice. In this way, I can digest the experience of a lifetime that has been lived as few other men have lived. I offer my wisdom to others. You see, I would not be silent.

The Commander Skolokov came to visit me. He tracked me down through the bureaucracy. I would not go away with him to space again. For any experience, once is enough satisfaction.

But to see you again would be a great satisfaction. In my most profound meditation, I am aware that you are still alive. I know that you have much.

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Here we have nothing, but we need nothing. People work hard, but the village does not depend on the outside world, not even for electricity. Only kerosene we need, and that we buy with surplus grain when harvest is good. The drinking water is pure.

Come here and you will be looked after. We will turn old age into an autumn of wisdom. Too many things get in the way of life, but here on my porch life is pure.

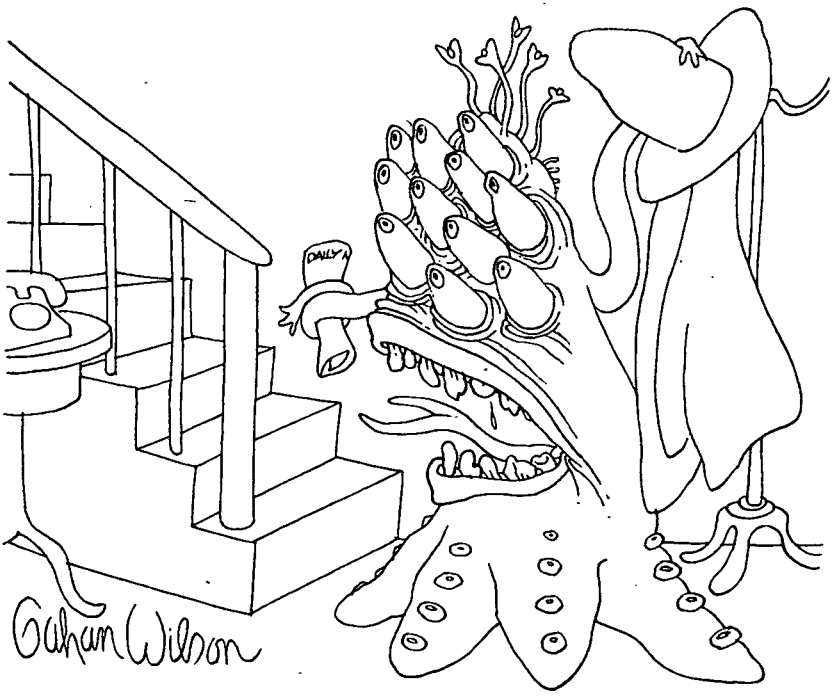
Send me a letter to say you will come.

Your friend,
Premchard Acharya Vinoba

Miracle made as if to tear up the letter. Then he tucked it back in its envelope. He tucked the envelope back into his pocket. He stood up. He laughed briefly, patting the pocket.

Then he went downstairs to meet Herbert's daughter.

She was a fine strapping lass who would know how to raise sons for a new nation.



"It's me!"

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"BAGGINS! WE HATES IT, WE HATES IT!"

Judging from some of the more unpleasant letters I get as a result of this column, one would think I was Jehovah turning out commandments. On the whole, however, I think I've gone out of my way to emphasize that I, like any other sensible critic, am putting forth only one (knowledgeable) man's opinion, and have seldom, if ever, declared myself to be the last word on anything.

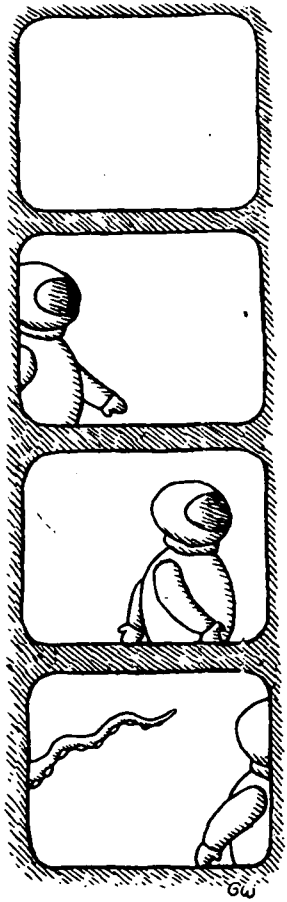
There is at least one subject, though, that I feel very strongly about, and this month's concern happens to be very involved in that subject. So before I set forth my rather violent opinion, allow me to state my credentials for coming down hard. The subject is J. R. R. Tolkien and his works.

As a child, I haunted the shelves of the library in search of what I thought of as "long fairy tales" — epitomally the Oz books. In 1944, I found a book called *The Hobbit*, which immediately became the standard by which I judged all fantasies, and which I read and reread throughout my adolescence. During that time, I met no other person who had read it except one lackwit female who didn't like it because the hero wasn't a strong enough character (you know the type).

One Sunday in 1954, perusing the Times Book Review, I found a full page review by W. H. Auden which was titled "The hero is a hobbit." Sure, I thought — hobbits were an accepted part of my life — turned the page, and did the double take of my career. Indeed, a new Tolkien book, the first of a trilogy! And

BAIRD SEARLES

Films and Television



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the three were released six months apart — 1955 was an agonized year. (Particularly when you think how the first two volumes end.)

Until about 1960 I met no one else who had read Tolkien that I hadn't forced to ("Love me, love Tolkien" was my motto). But then I became uneasily aware that a great many people who were not lovers, in fact people I didn't know at all, were reading Tolkien (some of them people I didn't *want* to know). And when I saw the first button that said "Frodo lives" I knew life would be hell from there on. Since then, I've kept my mouth shut, reread the books often, and collected all the various editions I could (the song of Tinuviel is quite extraordinary in Dutch, and you should see the fabulously beautiful British one volume edition of the trilogy).

But now I feel I must open my mouth; forgive the long winded introduction, but I felt I must establish the fact that I am not academically unprejudiced about Tolkien, but still, I hope, able to venture an intellectually justified argument about the abomination shown on television under the name of *The Hobbit*.

First off, let me state three undeniable facts about Tolkien's works. They are not cute. They are immensely "real" (realistic? convincing?) partially because of the immense amount of detail the reader is given, partially because of the reverberations of an active, ongoing world around the narrative itself. And, contrariwise, they are magic — whatever that indefinable word means. (It may be the very tension and contrast between the last two qualities that make them unique.)

Now it is these very things that make a translation to film absolutely impossible. Particularly given the realities of film creation and economics here and now.

If done live, despite the heights to which special effects have risen, there is no way to match the reality of landscape and beings that Tolkien has given us. If animated, as we saw from the Rankin/Bass production, the economic necessity of animation techniques result in two-dimensional, flattened-out, simplistic versions of the rich imagery that Tolkien has placed in our minds.

In the time limits allowed a film, there is no way to inject the immense detail that has made Middle Earth so real. And it seems to have become a cultural law that animated films must be for children and therefore, must be cute and even worse, must have songs; this is the heritage of Disney, and the several attempts to prove it wrong, to make a serious animated film, have failed miserably.

And to capture the magic of Tolkien in a visual medium would need as much creative genius *in* that medium as Tolkien had with words.

The best way to sum all this is to ask if someone who had never read the book would have undergone anything like the same experience in seeing the film, or even a film ten times better?

Now that we know the project was doomed from the start, let's tackle some specific horrors in the TV production. Everyone I've talked to has their own pet complaints (to use a mild word); I'll try to be restrained and just give a sampling of mine.

(*to page 123*)

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Our resident expert on things macabre, Gahan Wilson, calls Robert Aickman "the best living author of ghost stories," and we haven't heard a whisper of disagreement. Mr. Aickman was born in London in 1914, has published several anthologies of strange stories (Sub Rosa, Dark Entries) *in England. A U.S. collection of his work has just been published by Scribners under the title* Cold Hand in Mine. *He has written several stories for F&SF, including "Pages From A Young Girl's Journal," winner of The First World Fantasy Award for best short work.*

Marriage

by ROBERT AICKMAN

Helen Black and Ellen Brown: just a simple coincidence, and representative of the very best that life offers most of us by way of comedy and diversion. A dozen harmless accidents of that kind and one could spend a year of one's life laughing and wondering, and ever and anon recur to the topic in the years still to come.

Laming Gatestead met Helen Black in the gallery of the theater. The only thing that mattered much about the play or the production was that Yvonne Arnaud was in it, which resulted in Helen adoring the play, whereas Laming merely liked it. However, the topic gave them something to talk about. This was welcome, because it was only in the second intermission that Laming had plucked up courage (or whatever the relevant quality was) to speak at all.

Helen was a slightly austere-looking girl, with a marked bone structure and pale eyes. Her pale hair was entirely off the face, so that her equally pale ears were conspicuous. She might not have been what Laming would have selected had he been a playboy in Brussels or a casting director with the latest "Spotlight" on his knees; but, in present circumstances, the decisive elements were that Helen was all by herself and still quite young, whereas he was backward, blemished, and impecunious. Helen wore a delightfully simple black dress, very neatly kept. When they rose at the end of the applause, to which Laming had contributed with pleasing vigor, Helen proved to be considerably the taller.

Secretly, Laming was very surprised when she agreed to come with him for coffee and even more surprised when, after a second cup, she accepted his invitation to another gallery, this time with Marie Tempest as the attraction. A night was firmly settled upon for the following week. They were to find one another inside. Helen had appreciated how little money Laming might have, and being entertained to coffee was quite enough at that stage of their acquaintanceship.

He took her hand, only to shake it, of course, but even that was something.

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It was, however, a dry, bony hand, more neutral, he felt, than his own.

"Oh," he said, as if he had been speaking quite casually. "I don't know your name."

"Helen Black."

"Perhaps I'd better have your address? I might get a sore throat."

"42 Washwood Court, N.W.6."

Of course his Chessman's Diary for that year had been carefully though unobtrusively at the ready: an annual gift from his Aunty Antoinette.

"I'm Laming Gatestead."

"Like the place in the North?"

"Not Gateshead. Gatestead."

"So sorry." Her eyes seemed to warm a little in the ill-lit back street, on to which the gallery exit romantically debouched.

"Everyone gets it wrong."

"And what an unusual Christian name!"

"My father was keen on Sir Laming Worthington-Evans. He used to be secretary of state for war. He's dead now."

"Which of them is?"

"Both are, I'm afraid."

"I *am* sorry. Was your father a soldier?"

"No, he just liked to follow political form, as he called it."

They parted without Laming's address in Drayton Park having had to be prematurely divulged.

After that, they saw Leslie Banks and Edith Evans in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and before they had even stirred their coffee, Helen said, "My roommate and I would like you to come to supper one of these evenings. Not before eight o'clock, please, and don't expect too much."

Roommates were not always joined in such invitations, but Laming realized that, after all, Helen knew virtually nothing about him and might well have been advised not necessarily to believe a word men actually said.

"My roommate will be doing most of the cooking," said Helen.

Ah!

"What's her name?"

"Ellen Brown."

"What an extraordinary coincidence!"

"Isn't it? How about next Wednesday? Ellen comes home early on Wednesdays and will have more time."

"What does Ellen do?"

"She advises on baby clothes."

"Not exactly my world. Well, not yet."

"Ellen's very nice," said Helen firmly.

Helen's face offered much expression, Laming reflected. Within her own limits, she seemed to do perfectly well without it.

And, indeed, Ellen *was* nice. In fact, she was just about the nicest girl that Laming had ever encountered (if that was the word). Her handshake was soft, lingering, and very slightly moist, and the deep V of her striped jumper implied a trustfulness that went straight to Laming's heart. She had large brown eyes, a gentle nose, and thick, short hair, very dark, into which one longed to plunge first one's fingers and then one's mouth. Laming found himself offering her the box of White Magic peppermint creams he had brought with him, before realizing that of course he should have proffered it first to Helen.

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In fact, Ellen, herself so like a soft round peppermint cream, immediately passed the unopened box to Helen, which hardly made an ideal start to what was bound to be a tricky evening.

Ellen looked much younger than Helen. Fifteen years? Laming wondered. But he was no good at such assessments and had several times in his life made slightly embarrassing errors.

"I'm quite ready when you both are," said Ellen, as if Helen had contributed nothing to the repast. There was no smell of cooking and no sign of an overall or a teacloth. Everything was calm and controlled.

"Laming would like a glass of sherry first," said Helen. She wore a simple dark-blue dress.

Again Laming had difficulty in not raising his glass primarily to Ellen.

There was a little soup and then a cutlet each, with a few runner beans and pommes a la Suisse.

Helen sat at the head of the small rectangular table, with Laming on her left and Ellen on her right.

Laming was unable to meet Ellen's lustrous eyes for more than a second at a time, but there was no particular difficulty in gazing for longer periods at the glimpses of Ellen's slip, peony in color. Ellen's hand movements were beautiful too.

Helen was talking about how much she adored Leslie Banks. She would go absolutely anywhere to see him, do absolutely anything. She said such things without a trace of gush or even any particular animation. It was possibly a manner she had acquired in the civil service. (She was concerned in some way with poultry statistics.)

"I often *dream* of that mark on his face," said Helen calmly.

"Is it a birthmark?" asked Ellen. Her very voice was like sweet chestnut puree at Christmas and, in the same way, offered only sparingly. She had said only five things since Laming had been in the room. Laming knew because he had counted them. He also remembered them, word perfect.

"I think it's a war wound," said Laming, speaking toward his cutlet.

"Ellen wouldn't know," said Helen. "She doesn't follow the stage very much. We *must* go and see Raymond Massey some time, Laming. I adore him too, though not as much as Leslie Banks."

"Raymond Massey is a Canadian," offered Laming.

"But with hardly a trace of an accent."

"I once saw Fred Terry when I was a kid," said Laming. "In *Sweet Nell of Old Drury.*"

"I was brought up in Sidmouth, and Ellen in Church Winshull," said Helen.

"Only North London," said Laming, with exaggerated modesty. "But I saw Fred Terry and Julia Neilson at the King's Hammersmith when visiting my aunty."

"I simply long to go to Stratford-on-Avon." said Helen. "I believe Fabia Drake's doing frightfully well there."

"Yes, it would be lovely," said Laming.

"I adore opera too. I long to go to Bayreuth."

Laming was too unsure of the details to make an effective reply to that; so he concentrated on paring away the

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hard narrow strip from the upward edge of his cutlet.

Later there were orange segments and cream, while Helen spoke of life in South Devon, where she had lived as a child and Laming had twice been on farmhouse holidays.

Ellen brought them coffee, while they sat on the settee. Her eyes were reflected in the fluid. No odalisque could have made slighter movements to more effect.

The peppermint creams came partially into their own.

"I don't eat many sweet things," said Helen. "You *must* remember, Laming?"

The worst part was that now he *did* remember. She had submitted quite a list of such items in the cafe after Marie Tempest. What she liked most was chicken perfectly plain. What she liked least was anything rich. What a crashing mistake he had made in the selection of his gift! But what else would have been practicable?

Ellen, however, was making up for her roommate. She was eating cream after cream, and without even asking before taking another, which made it all the more intimate.

"I long to visit Japan and see the Noh." said Helen.

Laming did not know about that at all and could only suppose it was a relative of the mikado, about whom there was something unusual. Or perhaps it was a huge stone thing, like the Sphinx.

"When I get my certificate, I'm going on a real bust," said Laming, then blushed at the word. "*If* I get my certificate, that is."

"Surely you will, Laming?"

"No one can ever be quite sure."

Ellen was twisting about in the armchair, arranging herself better.

Laming told a rather detailed story about the older colleague in the firm who had left no stone unturned but still lacked a certificate. "It's held up his marriage for more than eight years. He was there long before I was."

"I'm sure that won't happen to you, Laming. Shall we ask Ellen to give us some more coffee? Don't you adore coffee? I drink it all night to keep me awake."

Laming assumed that it was her statistics. Increasingly, civil servants were having to take work home, as if they had been in real business. Laming had read about it in the evening paper, more than once, in fact.

"Not too full, Ellen! I shall slop it over myself."

"Would you like to see my old programs, Laming? Ellen won't mind, I'm sure."

But Laming had managed to glimpse a meaning look in Ellen's soft features. It contrasted noticeably with Helen's habitual inexpressiveness.

"*I* should like it, but I think we should do something that Ellen can join in."

He was quite surprised at himself and did not dare to look at Helen that time.

"Shall we play three-handed Rocket?"

"I'm afraid I don't know the rules."

"I'm nothing like clever enough for them," said Ellen, her sixth or seventh remark.

Laming had ceased to count. He knew he could not carry any more re-

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marks faithfully enough in his mind.

"Well, then, we'll just talk," said Helen. "What are we going to do next, Laming?"

"There's that thing at the Apollo."

"Yes, I long to see that."

"I can't remember a single thing that's been said about it."

"We mustn't always allow our minds to be made up for us."

They had all become quite chummy, Laming realized; nor could it be the passing effect of alcohol. At that moment he felt that he had been really accepted into the household. Instinctively, his manners fell to pieces a little.

At the end of the evening, Helen said, "You must come again often. We like having company, don't we, Ellen?"

Ellen simply nodded, but with her lovely, almost elfin, smile. She was fiddling with the bottom edge of her jumper, using both hands. The narrow horizontal stripes were in a sort of grey, a sort of blue, a sort of pink. Her skirt was fawn.

"I should very much like to, Helen," replied Laming, in a public-school manner, though the place he had been to was pretty near the bottom of any realistic list.

"Well, do. Now, Laming, we meet a week from today at the Apollo."

She imparted her dry grip. Laming could not but remember that only three or four weeks ago it had all but thrilled him. When in bed, he must look at his Chessman's Diary to see *exactly* how long ago it had been.

Ellen merely stood smiling, but with her hands locked together behind her skirt, a posture that moved Laming considerably.

On the way home, however, he was wrestling with a problem more familiar: the problem of how to attempt reciprocation in these cases, when one could not at all afford it; these cases in which hospitality could hardly be rejected if one were to remain a social being at all. The complaint against life might be that even if one expended one's every mite, which would be both unwise and impracticable, the social level accomplished did not really justify the sacrifice. Most urgently one needed to start at a higher level: *ab initio, ab ovo*. And, if one hadn't, what really was the use?

But after business came pleasure, and Laming, awake in bed, spent a long, long time musing on Ellen, and twisting about restlessly. It was grey dawn before, in a sudden panic, he fell asleep.

In fact, *was* thinking about Ellen a pleasure? Apart from the inner turmoil caused by her very existence, there was the certainty that she was quite other than she seemed, and the extreme uncertainty about what to do next in order to advance with her.

When his mother brought him his cup of tea, he looked at her with sad eyes, then quickly turned away, lest she notice.

However, for the first time in Laming's life, something extraordinary happened, something that a third party might have marveled at for months and drawn new hope from.

Only two days later a crisis had arisen in the office: one of the partners required a parcel to be delivered at an address "down Fulham way," as the

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partner put it; and Laming had been the first to volunteer for the job — or perhaps, as he subsequently reflected, the junior who could best be spared.

"You can take a No. 14 most of the distance," the partner had said. "If you get stuck, ask someone. But do take care, old chap. That thing's fragile." Whereupon he had guffawed and returned to his den.

Laming had clambered off the bus at more or less the spot the partner had indicated and had looked around for someone to guide him further. At such times, so few people look as if they could possibly know; so few are people one could care or dare to address at all. In the end, and without having to put down the heavy parcel, Laming had obtained directions from a middle-aged district nurse, though she had proved considerably less informed than Laming had taken for granted. In no time at all, Laming had been virtually lost, and the parcel twice or thrice its former weight.

And now he had come to a small park or municipal garden, with mongrels running about the kids in one corner, breaking things up. He was very nearly in tears. At the outset, it had seemed likely that offering to perform a small service would stand well for him in his career, but that notion had gone into reverse and japed at him within five minutes of his starting to wait for the bus. He could hardly carry the parcel much further. Ought he to spend money of his own on a taxi? If one were to appear?

And then he saw Ellen. The road was on his left, the dark-green park railings were on his right, and there were very few people on the pavement. Ellen was walking towards him. He nearly fainted, but responsibility for the parcel somehow saved him.

"Hullo, Laming!"

It was as if they were the most tender and long-standing of friends, for whom all formality was quite unnecessary.

"Hullo, Ellen!"

He too spoke very low, though really they were almost alone in the world.

"Come and sit down."

He followed her along the length of railing and through the gate. In a sense, it was quite a distance, but she said nothing more. He had heard that, in circumstances such as these, burdens became instantly and enduringly lighter, but he was not finding that with the parcel.

She was wearing a sweater divided into diamonds of different colors, but with nothing garish about it; and the same fawn skirt.

Once or twice she looked back with an encouraging smile. Laming almost melted away, but again the parcel helped to stabilize him.

He had naturally supposed that they would sit on a seat. There were many seats, made years ago of wooden beams set in green cast iron frames, some almost perpendicular, some sloping lasciviously backward. Many had been smashed up by children, and none at that moment seemed in any way occupied.

But Ellen sat down at the foot of a low grassy bank, even though there was an empty seat standing almost intact at the top of the rise. Laming, after a moment for surprise and hesitation, quite

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naturally sat down beside her. It was early May and the grass seemed dry enough, though the sky was overcast and depressing. He deposited the parcel as carefully as he could. It was a duty to keep close to it.

"I want you," said Ellen. "Please take me." She lifted his left hand and laid it on her right thigh, but under her skirt. He felt her rayon panties. It was the most wonderful moment in his life.

He knew perfectly well also that with the right person such things as this normally do not happen, but only infrequently with the wrong person.

He twisted round and, inserting his right hand under her jumper until it reached up to her sweetly silken breast, kissed her with passion. He had never kissed anyone with passion before.

"Please take me," said Ellen again.

One trouble was of course that he never had, and scarcely knew how. Chaff from the chaps really tells one very little. Another trouble was "lack of privacy," as he had heard it termed. He doubted very much whether most people — even most men — started in such an environment, whatever they might do later.

He glanced round as best he could. It was true that the park, quite small though it was, now seemed also quite empty. The children must be wrecking pastures new. And the visibility was low and typical.

"Not the light for cricket," said Laming. As a matter of fact, there were whitish things at the other end, which he took to be sight screens.

"Please," said Ellen, in her low, urgent voice. Her entire conversational method showed how futile most words really are. She began to range around him with her hand.

"But what about —?"

"It's *all right*. Please."

Still, it really was the sticking point, the pons asinorum, the gilt off the gingerbread, as everyone knew.

"Please," said Ellen.

She kicked off her shoes, partly grey, partly black; and he began to drag down her panties. The panties were in the most beautiful, dark-rose color: her secret, hidden from the world.

It was all over much more quickly than anyone would have supposed. But it was wrong that it should have been so. He knew that. If it were ever to become a regular thing for him, he must learn to think much more of others, much less of himself. He knew that perfectly well.

Fortunately the heavy parcel seemed still to be where he had placed it. The grass had, however, proved to be damp after all.

He could hardly restrain a cry. Ellen was streaked and spattered with muddy moisture, her fawn skirt, one would say, almost ruined; and he realized that he was spattered also. It would be impossible for him to return to the office that day. He would have to explain some fiction on the telephone, and then again to his mother, who, however, he knew, could be depended upon with the cleaners — if, this time, cleaning could do any good. He and Ellen must have drawn the moisture from the ground with the heat of their bodies.

Ellen seemed calm enough, nonetheless, though she was not precisely

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smiling. For a moment, Laming regretted that she spoke so little. He would have liked to know what she was thinking. Then he realized that it would be useless anyway. Men never know what girls are thinking, and least of all at moments such as this. Well, obviously.

He smiled at her uneasily.

The two of them were staring across what might later in the year become the pitch. At present, the grey-greenness of everything was oddly meaningless. In mercy, there was still almost no one within the park railings; that is, no one visible, for it was inconceivable that in so publicly available a place, only a few miles from Oxford Circus and Cambridge Circus, there should at so waking an hour be no one absolutely. Without shifting himself from where he was seated, Laming began to glance around more systematically. Already he was frightened, but then he was almost always more frightened than not. In the end, he looked over his shoulder.

He froze.

On the seat almost behind them, the cast-iron and wood seat that Ellen had silently disdained, Helen was now seated. She wore the neat and simple black dress she had worn in the first place. Her expression was as expressionless as ever.

Possibly Laming even cried out.

He turned back and sank his head between his knees.

Ellen put her soft hand on his forearm. "Don't *worry*, Laming," she said.

She drew him back against her bosom. It seemed to him best not to struggle. There must be an answer of some kind, conceivably, even, one that was not wholly bad.

"*Please* don't worry, Laming," said Ellen, cooingly.

And when the time came for them to rise up finally, the seat was empty. Truly, it was by then more overcast than ever: Stygian might be the very word.

"Don't forget your parcel," said Ellen, not merely conventionally but with genuine solicitude.

She linked her arm affectionately through his and uttered no further word as they drew away.

He was quite surprised that the gate was still open.

"Where shall we meet next?" asked Ellen.

"I have my job," said Laming, torn about.

"Where is it?"

"We usually call it Bloomsbury."

She looked at him. Her eyes were wise and perhaps mocking.

"Where do you live?"

"Near Finsbury Park."

"I'll be there on Saturday. In the park. Three o'clock in the American Garden."

She reached up and kissed him most tenderly with her kissing lips. She was, of course, far, far shorter than Helen.

"What about Helen?" he asked.

"You're going to the Apollo with Helen on Wednesday," she replied unanswerably.

And, curiously enough, he had then found the address for the parcel almost immediately. He had just drifted on in a thoroughly confused state of mind, and there the house obviously was, though the maid looked very sniffy indeed about the state of his suit in the

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light from the hall, not to speak of his countenance and hands; and from below a dog had growled deeply as he slouched down the steps.

Soon, the long-threatened rain began.

Of course, had he been a free agent, Laming was so frightened that he would not have seen Ellen again. But he was far from a free agent. He had refused, Ellen might have caused trouble with Helen, whom he had to meet on Wednesday: women were far, far closer to other women in such matters, then men were to men. Alternatively, he could never just leave Ellen standing about indefinitely in the American Garden; he was simply not made that way; and if he were to attempt a deferment with her, all her sweetness would turn to gall. There was very little scope for a deferment, in any case: the telephone was not at all a suitable instrument, in the exact circumstances, and with his nervous temperament. And there was something else, of course: Laming now had a girl, and such an easygoing one, so cozy, so gorgeous in every way; and he knew that he would be certain to suffer within himself later if he did not do what he could to hold on to her — at least to the extent of walking up to the American Garden and giving it one more try. Helen or no Helen. It is always dangerous to put anything second to the need we all feel for love.

It was colder that day, and she was wearing a little coat. It was in simple midbrown and had square buttons, somewhere between bone and pearl in appearance. She was dodging about among the shrubs, perhaps in order to keep warm. Laming had wondered about that on the way up.

"Hullo, stranger!"

"Hullo, Ellen!"

She kissed her inimitable kiss, disregarding the retired railwaymen sitting about in greatcoats and mufflers, waiting for the park cafe to open.

"We're going somewhere," said Ellen.

"Just as well," said Laming, with a shiver, partly nerves, partly sex, partly cool, damp treacherous weather. But of course he had struck entirely the wrong and unromantic note. "Where are we going?" he asked.

"You'll see," said Ellen, and took his arm in her affectionate way, entirely real.

The railwaymen glowered motionlessly, awaiting strong tea, awaiting death, seeing death before them, not interfering.

Ellen and Laming tramped silently off, weaving round bushes, circumventing crowded baby carriages.

Orsino, Endymion, Adonis: the very roads were named after lovers. Laming had never noticed that before. He had always approached the park from the south, and usually with his mother, who did not walk fast and often gasped painfully. Once in the park she had downed a whole bottle of Tizer. How they had all laughed about that, for ever and a day!

Round this turn and that, in the queer streets north of the park, Ellen and Laming stole, tightly locked together; until, within the shake of a lamb's tail as it seemed, they were ascending a narrow flight of steep black

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stairs. Ellen had unlocked the front door, as if to the manner born, and of course she was going up first. She unlocked another door and they were home and dry.

"Did it work out all right about your clothes? The mud, I mean?"

She merely smiled at him.

"Who lives here?"

"My sister."

"Not Helen!"

Of course not Helen. What a silly thing to say! How stupidly impulsive! Ellen said nothing.

There were little drawings on the walls by imitators of Peter Scott and Mabel Lucie Attwell, but all much faded by years of summer sun while the tenant was out at work.

Or tenants. Most of the floor space was occupied by an extremely double divan, even a triple divan, Laming idiotically, speculated, squarer than square. It hardly left room for the little round white table, with pansies and mignonette round the edge. All seemed clean, trim, self-respecting. The frail white chairs for dinner parties were neatly tucked in.

"Is your sister married?"

Ellen continued silent. She stood in front of him, smiling, abiding.

He took off her coat and placed it on the hanger on the door. There was a housecoat hanging there already, sprayed with faded yellow Chinamen and faded blue pagodas and faded pink dragons with one dot in each eye.

"She won't barge in on us suddenly?"

Ellen threw back her head. Her neck was beautifully shaped, her skin so radiant, that it seemed all wrong to touch it. She was wearing a little mauve dress, fastening up the back, and with a pleated skirt.

Laming put his hands gently on her breasts, but she did not raise her head.

When he lifted it for her, it fell forward on her front, in renewed token of uninterest in sociable conventionalities, in the accepted tensions.

Laming unfastened her dress and drew it over her head. Unskillfully though he had done it, her hair looked almost the same, and, in what slight disorder had arisen, even more alluring.

She was wearing nothing but a plum-colored garter belt and lovely, lovely stockings.

Laming wished there was somewhere where he himself could undress alone. There were various doors. The kitchenette. The bath and toilet. A cupboard or two for rainwear and evening dresses and ironing boards. It would look silly to open so many doors, one after the other. Laming drew the curtain across the window, as if that made any difference. In any case, and owing to mechanical difficulties, he had drawn it only half across the window.

He undressed with his back to her, as if that made any difference either.

She would be naked by now, and half laughing at him, half fractious, because he had never before knowingly seen a naked adult woman.

When, lumpishly, he turned to her, she had removed her garter belt, but still wore her stockings, now secured by garters. She had brought them out from somewhere. They were bunched up in pink, and violet, and black lace. She was no longer smiling. She looked

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as serious and ethereal as an angel on a card.

"What about —?" There was that, and everyone knew it.

"Come in," said Ellen, climbing in herself.

The immense divan was as the sea. Clinging together, he and she were drowning in it, down, drown, down, drown. As they dropped, all the way, she showed him small, wonderful things, which tied him in fetters, clogged him with weights.

Hours later, as it seemed, it was over; and until who could tell when? It had continued for so long that he was afraid to look at his watch. *Post coitum omne animal triste est,* as the boozy classics and history master had pointed out to the middle fifth, Laming's highest form in the school.

However, it was still daylight. Could it be the next day, Sunday? Had his mother been left alone in the house all night? Of course not, but the real trouble was the utter and total irreconcilability between this life, real life perhaps, and daily life. Laming apprehended this with a lurch like a broken leg or arm: a fracture that could never mend.

Ellen was pottering about, doing things to herself, making tea.

It occurred to Laming that exactly at the point where this life, real life, and daily life were at right angles, stood Helen, or, rather, sat on a park bench. Laming, naked in some almost unknown person's bed, actually found himself looking around the room for her, and with small starts of terror, as when jabbed by a schoolfriend's penknife.

Ellen emerged from the kitchenette with two cups of tea on a small tray. It had been a gift offer and was covered with eider ducks, the name of the firm scrupulously omitted. Ellen had straightened both her stockings and her tight, frilly garters. Laming could still feel the latter tickling his thighs when it had all begun.

Tea was just what he wanted; Ellen had somehow known that, as his mother always knew it. Ellen was drinking it only for company's sake and making eyes at him over the rim of the cup. God, the illusion there can be in a single cup of hot tea! In the first cup, anyway. But it would be quite like Helen to materialize ever so faintly, just when he was relaxing, though it would have been difficult for her to find anywhere suitable to sit in the bijou flatlet. The only armchair was filled with copies of *The Natural World,* so that Ellen was sitting on the foot of the divan, with her legs pressed together in the most ladylike degree. Her breasts were firm as cockleshells.

She rose chastely and came for his empty cup.

"More?"

He faintly shook his head. Normally, he would have accepted and probably gone on accepting, but now he felt unequal even to drinking tea. He was a haunted man.

Ellen took the cups back into the kitchenette, and he could hear her tidily washing them up. She put the milk back in the refrigerator, and what was presumably the ingredient itself back into a little cabinet which shut with a click and was probably marked *Tea.* She returned to the living room

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and, standing before a small octagonal looking glass in which the reproduction of "The Childhood of John the Baptist" had previously been reflected, began to comb her silky but sturdy hair.

Laming assumed from this that they were about to depart and felt most disinclined. It was as when at last one reaches Bexhill or Gognor Regis and the beach is calling, but never before has one felt more promise to lie in mere musing in and upon one's new bed and, thus, half slumbering one's life away.

Ellen combed and combed; then she tied a wide cherry-colored sash round her breasts and reentered the divan with him. He could smell the scent she had sprayed on her neck and shoulders in the bathroom. Even her eyes were brighter than ever under the influence of some ointment. Her hand began once more to explore Laming. To his surprise, he roused up immediately, and was bemused no more. It might have been the brief and partial breaking in of daily life that had half stupefied him. He tied Ellen's sash tighter than ever with the strength that is supposedly male; so that her bright eyes clouded like pools.

Hours later once more; it was not merely dark but black as blindfold, and they were both lying on the floor, relishing its hardness through the carpet, which stretched from wall to wall, though that was but a short way, however one measured it. Ellen's body was hard too, now that there was resistance. Their legs tangled like rubbery plants. She showed him things that can only be done in the dark, however clumsily, things he would never be able quite to evade or reject.

Laming felt an agonizing, sciatic pain and writhed upwards, though Ellen's arms were still round his waist.

He saw that from what must have been the ceiling, or at least very near the ceiling, a pair of pale eyes were looking expressionlessly down on him, on the two of them —. He could even see some hint of the bone structure surrounding the eyes. Then there was another pain, like a gutting knife ripping out his tendon.

He yelled out, from the pain and from the vision. Instantly, Ellen was all softness and tenderness, a minstering angel of the midnight. He clenched his eyes shut, as he had so often done in childhood and at school, however foolish it might seem to do it when all was dark anyway.

Midnight! Or could it be even later? He had no idea what had become of his watch. He only knew that his mother must have started worrying long since. Her dependence on him was complete, so that much of the time he quite forgot about her.

He was lying on his back with Ellen on top of him, embracing him, enveloping him, enchanting him. Her released bosom pressed tenderly down on him, and her mouth rested softly on his chin. In the end, she had reconciled him to reopening his screwed up eyes, which were about the level of her head. He had to give himself a mental jerk in order to perform the operation, but he really knew quite well that the other eyes, or face, would have gone. They never remained for very long.

When they had the light on and were walking about again, he still felt the sciatic stress, very much so. He was

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positively limping, though Ellen could not have been nicer about it, more sympathetic. It proved not to be midnight at all, let alone later. It was only about quarter to eleven.

"Doesn't your sister want to come home sometimes?"

"Not when *we* want the flat, silly."

They walked, arm in arm, to Major House station. Even the jazz on the radio had mostly stopped.

"I'm seeing Helen on Wednesday," he remarked idiotically.

"And me on Saturday," she responded. "Same time and place. OK?"

There was some kind of pause.

"OK, Laming?"

"OK," said Laming.

She kissed him softly and disappeared down the station steps with complete composure, utter serenity.

It was only just after quarter past when Laming put his key in his mother's front door. Though his mother was pale, she was so glad to see him that it was quite easy to explain that another chap had suggested that he and Laming go to the movies and that the picture had proved much longer than they had thought, and so forth. The film had been about climbing in the High Andes, Laming said, and there were wonderful shots of llamas.

"I thought they were in the Himalayas, Laming."

"These were llamas with two l's, Mumsey dear. As if they were Welsh llamas. They have almond eyes and they spit."

The explanations were practicable because he had in fact seen the film, without having bothered to tell her. It had been shown some weeks ago in the canteen next-door to the office, where many of the men found their way for lunch. It was being circulated to such places by some adult educational organization. The oldest things prove in the end to have a use of some kind, Laming reflected. He had often noticed that.

"What's the matter with your leg, Laming?"

"I think I've twisted it somehow."

"Better see Dr. Pokorna on Monday before you go to work."

"It'll be quite well by Monday, I promise, Mumsey."

She still looked doubtful, as well as pale.

"I promise."

What he could never decide about her was whether she really took it for granted that girls were a matter of indifference to him.

"Something wrong with your leg, Laming?"

"I seem to have twisted it, Helen. I've no idea where."

"What have you been doing with yourself since our little party?"

"Same old grind." Really, he could not bring himself to meet her eyes. He did not see how he ever again could meet them, look right into their paleness. What was he to do?

"Not many people here," he said.

"We mustn't let ourselves be affected by numbers. We must behave and react exactly as we should if the theater were packed."

"Yes, of course," said Laming, though he did not know how he was going to do that either.

Furthermore, the curtain simply

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would not go up. Even though no one new had come in for ten minutes by Laming's watch, the watch that had been lost in the big bed.

"Did you enjoy our party?" asked Helen.

"You know I did, Helen."

"Ellen said she thought you didn't like her."

"Of course I liked her, Helen."

"Don't you think she's very attractive in her own way?"

"I'm sure she is."

"I sometimes feel quite a shadow when I'm with her, even though I may be that much cleverer."

"She doesn't seem to speak very much."

"Ellen's a very nice person, but she happens to be the exact opposite to me in almost every way," explained Helen. "I should adore to change places with her once in a while. Don't you think that would be great fun?"

A man in a dinner jacket had come onto the front of the stage and was reading from a piece of paper, having first assumed a pair of spectacles, while they watched it. It appeared that one of the company had a sudden attack of gastric flu; time had passed while his understudy had been sought for on the telephone; and it had now been decided that someone else's understudy should come on in the proper costume and read the part from the script.

"I thought that understudies were always waiting about in the wings," said Laming.

"I expect there isn't much money with this production," said Helen. "It's a shame about the poor fellow being ill, isn't it?"

"I've never heard of him."

"It might have been his big chance," said Helen, "and now its gone, because the play might be off before he's better."

"We mustn't think about that," said Laming, following her earlier and more sanguine cue.

How on earth was he to entertain her at the end? After that party? What exactly would she expect? The problem had been worrying him all day. He had become involved with two girls when he could not afford even one, never had been able to and probably never would.

Descending the many steps to ground level, Helen summed up excellently: the rest of the cast had naturally been affected by the zombie in their midst, and it would be unfair to judge the play, as a play, by this single overcast representation. "I adore blank verse, anyway," Helen concluded.

Laming hadn't even realized.

"Especially this new kind," said Helen. "It can be terribly exciting, don't you think?"

Of course she gave no sign of being excited in the least, because she never did.

"Would you like a Welsh rarebit tonight, Helen? By way of a little change?"

"Oh, no, I can't eat things like cheese. Our usual cup of coffee is absolutely all I need. Besides, it makes a kind of tradition for us, don't you think?"

At the end, she suggested that next time they go to *Reunion in Vienna*, with the Lunts.

He really could not suggest that there might be difficulty in finding a

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free evening, and he doubted whether she could suggest it either, even in quite other circumstances.

"The Lunts are very popular," he pointed out. "We might not get in."

"Let's try. If we fail, we can always go to something else. We shall be in the middle of Theaterland. What about a week from today?"

Could we make it Thursday?"

They agreed to meet in the queue that time.

They still shook hands each time they parted, though, by now, only in a token way. Advance in intimacy was marked by her omission to remove her glove for such a trifling, though symbolic, contact.

"You tie me up nicely and then you can do what you like with me. Afterwards, I'll tie you up and do things with *you.*" For Ellen it was a quite long speech, the longest, he thought, he had ever heard her make. They had already been in the flatlet a good couple of hours.

It had become much warmer, as befitted the later part of May, and she had been wearing a short-sleeved blouse, instead of a sweater; a beach skirt instead of the fawn one. The blouse was in narrow honey and petunia stripes, with a still narrower white stripe at intervals. Ellen had left most of the buttons unfastened. The retired railwaymen, some without their jackets, had just stared and then began talking with self-conscious absorption, to their fellow workers, willing her to go, to be burnt up, while they diverted attention. Ellen was also wearing little-girl knee socks. Laming was desiring her far past the point of embarrassment all the way to the flatlet. He could not even touch her, let alone take her half-bare arm.

But when, at that later point, he acted upon her suggestion, he had to admit to himself that he lost initiative: he did not really know what he *could* do, what would be far enough out of the ordinary to please her. And when he appealed to her for suggestions, she began to display that all too familiar female amalgam of mockery and fury.

It was when he struck out at her with the first thing that came to hand that he saw Helen standing in the window with her back to the room. She too wore a lighter dress, one that Laming had not seen before; cornflower-colored. Previously, he had himself had the window behind him, or at his feet, but of course she could not have been there or she would have cast a shadow, and right across Ellen's body. Or was that true of whatever was in the room with him and Ellen?

The figure in the window was all too manifestly sunk in trouble and despair. One could almost hear the sobs and see the bitter tears falling on the new dress. Even the hair was obviously disordered across the face.

Laming threw away the object he had snatched up, totally unromatic and unsuitable in any case.

"What's the matter now?" enquired Ellen.

"Look!" This time Laming actually pointed a shaking finger. "Look!" he cried again.

"What at?"

On the previous occasions he was unsure whether or not Ellen had seen what he saw. He also realized quite

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well, then and now, that it would probably remain uncertain, no matter what she said or did.

"Look at *me* instead," said Ellen quietly. "Do something nice to me, Laming!"

He looked back at the window, but of course the two of them were once more alone, or seemingly so.

"Oh, my God," cried Laming.

"Do something nice to me, Laming," said Ellen again. "Please, Laming."

She was becoming ever more talkative, it would seem; and he had realized that there were things one could do, which involved talk, very much so. The popular antithesis between talk and action is frequently false, but in no case more so than after meeting a girl in the American Garden.

Laming liked *Reunion in Vienna* better than any other play he could remember. He could identify almost completely with the archduke in white tunic and scarlet trousers, for whom Haydn's stirring anthem was played whenever he appeared, and for whom ladies wore lovely evening dresses almost all the time. There was sadness in it too, though; if there was no hope at all of ever living like that (because nowadays no one did), what point was there to living at all? Laming was so carried away by the finale to Act One that he momentarily forgot all about Helen, and when the intermission came, he could think of nothing to say to her. She might perhaps like the play, at least up to a point; but it could not conceivably mean as much to her as it meant to him.

What Helen proved really to like was Lynne Fontanne. "I should adore to look as elegant as that," she said.

"You often do," responded Laming, though it cost him an effort, and she actually took his hand for a moment as they sat there.

How strange life is! Laming reflected. If he had somehow been richer, he could obviously have been a Lothario. As things were, Helen's hand frightened him. Also she was wearing the cornflower dress he had first seen the previous Saturday in the flatlet.

"I love coming here with you," she said later, when they were in the cafe. "It's an adventure for me." If only she could have *looked* more adventurous! Laming supposed it was that which was wrong.

Moreover, the three girls who served in the place, all obtrusively married, had long ago come to recognize Helen and Laming when they entered and to take them more and more for granted. Helen quite probably liked that, but Laming did not. Also they solicited with increasing cheekiness for more substantial orders than single cups of coffee. Laming was perfectly well aware that the three girls were laughing at him every minute he was in the place and probably for much of the rest of their time together too.

"What about *Careless Rapture* next week?"

"We shall never get in to *that*."

"The gallery's *enormous*."

He had not known, because he had never entered the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane.

Again they agreed to meet in the queue. That evening, Helen had con-

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tinued to insist upon paying for herself, most honorably.

"I adore Ivor Novello's way of speaking," said Helen. "It gives me the shivers."

"Isn't he—?"

"What does *that* matter, Laming? We must be open-minded, though of course I wouldn't actually *marry* Ivor."

Laming could think of no rejoinder.

In any case he needed no reminding that he was a man marked down.

And to think that he had started all this himself, taken the initiative quite voluntarily! At least, he supposed he had? In what unpredictable ways just about everything worked out! Most things, in fact, went into full reverse, just as was always happening at school! If you want peace, prepare for war, as the classics and history master had admonished them.

"I can't *wait* till next time," said Helen unexpectedly, as they parted.

Not that even then her eyes lighted up, or anything like that.

Laming realized that work with poultry statistics in the civil service was hardly calculated to put a light in anyone's eyes. He quite appreciated the need to be fair. It was simply so difficult to act upon it.

Laming thought of Ellen's eyes.

But apparently the immediate trouble was to be that Helen's inability to wait until next time had to be taken literally. Laming began to see her all over the place.

The first occasion was the very next morning, Thursday. He had been sent out by the office manager to buy sponge cakes to go with everyone's midmorning coffee, and he had glimpsed her back view on the other side of the street, still in that same dress, purchased or brought out for the summer that was now upon them all.

He was very upset.

Nonetheless, the second occasion proved to be that same afternoon. Laming had been dispatched by the partner who was in charge of buying to an address in E.1., almost Whitechapel, Laming thought; and, in that unlikely region, he saw Helen in her dress climbing aboard a No. 25 bus, not ten yards in front of him. She was having difficulty with what appeared to be a heavy black bundle. Indeed, on account of it, she might well have spotted Laming, and perhaps had. Of course it would have been unreasonable to suppose that in the course of a single day she would have had time or reason to change her dress. Still, Laming was now not merely ordinarily frightened, but for the time almost deprived of thought, so that he could not for the life of him recall what he had been told to seek in E.1. The buying partner spoke very sharply to him when he crept into the office empty-handed (he had managed to lose even his library book) and ashen.

And after Laming had been totally unable to explain himself to his mother, and had then passed one of his utterly sleepless nights, came, on Friday morning, the third occasion; and, this third time, he walked straight into Helen, head-on. Things had begun to move faster.

He had left the office quite voluntarily, saying that he needed to be in the fresh air for a few minutes, and had

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walked into Helen within a bare two hundred yards from the outer door, where Tod sat, the one-eyed custodian. It was before Laming had even reached the appliance place on the corner, about which everyone joked.

What was more, he could have sworn that not for a second had he seen her coming, even though there were very few people on the pavement, far, far fewer, he would have said, than usual at that hour. If he had detected her, if there had been even the slightest tremor of warning, he would have shown the swiftest possible pair of heels the street had ever seen, convention or no convention, bad leg or no bad leg; and if he had been run over in the process, would it have mattered very much?

Helen was wearing another neat summer dress (after all, a whole sleepless night had passed), this one white creeping foliage on a brick wall background, as Laming could see quite well; and she was again carrying something weighty, this time slung over her left shoulder, which gave her an utterly absurd resemblance to the cod-carrying fisherman in the Scott's Emulsion advertisement. There was no advertisement that Laming knew better than that one; standing, as it did, for *mens sana in corpore sano*.

"Hullo," said Laming, in a very low, very shivery voice, audible to no one but her.

She simply trudged past him in her white court shoes, very simple in design. She showed no sign of even seeing him, let alone of hearing his greeting. Under other circumstances, it might have been difficult to decide whether she looked alive or dead. Her burden duly took the shape of a long, grey anonymous object. It seemed to be heavier than ever, as Helen was staggering a little, deviating from a perfectly straight course.

Laming clung sickly to the railings until a middle-aged woman with hair made metallic by curlers came halfway up the area steps and asked if he was all right.

"Quite all right," replied Laming, a little petulantly.

The woman washed her hands of him on her flowered overall.

But then a police constable materialized.

"Had a little too much?"

Laming thought it best to nod.

"Work near here?"

Laming nodded again.

It was fortunate that all the partners had left together for luncheon before Laming was brought back to the office by an arm of the law.

The next day, Saturday, Laming's leg was suddenly much worse. Indeed, it hurt so much that he could hardly walk the short distance to the park, and the American Garden was, of course, on the far side. His mother looked extremely anxious as she stood on the porch, kissing him good-by again and again. It was quite terribly hot.

Still, much was at stake, and Laming was determined to meet Ellen, even if he did himself a permanent injury. He would be most unlikely ever again to find anyone like Ellen in his entire life, so that, if he lost her, a permanent injury might hardly matter. Confused thinking, but, as with so much thinking

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of that kind, conclusive.

When he arrived, he found that the railwaymen were actually lying on their backs upon the grass. They were in their braces, with their eyes shut, their mouths sagging. It was like the end of a military engagement, the reckoning.

And, this time, there was no sign at all of Ellen, who had previously been there first. Laming looked in vain behind all the shrub arrangements and then lowered himself onto one of the seats which the railwaymen normally occupied. He extended his bad leg, then lifted it horizontally onto the seat.

A fireman in uniform sauntered past, looking for dropped matches, for tiny plumes of smoke. There was a sound of children screeching at one another, but that was over the brow of the hill. Laming would have taken off his jacket if he had not been meeting a lady.

"Hullo, Laming."

It was Helen's voice. She had crept up behind his head in complete silence.

"Ellen asked me to say that she can't come today. She's so sorry. There's a difficulty in the shop. We're both a bit early, aren't we?"

Laming pushed and pulled his bad leg off the seat, and she sat beside him.

She was in the brick-wall dress with the mesh of white foliage. She looked cool and dry as ever. How could Laming be there early? He must have made too much allowance for infirmity.

"Say something!" said Helen.

What could anyone say? Laming felt as if he had suffered a blow on the very center of the brain from a lead ingot. His leg had begun to burn in a new way.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you." said Helen.

Laming managed to smile a little. He still knew that if he said anything at all, it would be something foolish, ludicrously inappropriate.

"Please take me to Kelly's flat." It seemed to be a matter of course.

"Kelly?" Even that had been copycatted without volition.

"Where you usually go. Come on, Laming. It'll be fun. We might have tea there."

"I can only walk slowly. Trouble again with my leg."

"Ellen says it's just round the corner. We can buy some cakes on the way."

They set forth, a painful journey, were Laming was concerned. They circumvented the inert railwaymen. In one or two cases, Helen stepped over them, but that was more than Laming cared to risk.

Helen spoke. "Won't you take my hand, as it's Saturday?"

"I'd like to, but I think I'd better concentrate."

"Take my arm, if you prefer."

Orsino, Endymion, Adonis: how differently one feels about these heroes when one re-encounters them amid such pain, such heat!

Nor did they buy any cakes; there was no shop, and Laming did not feel like going in search, even though he realized it might be wise to do so.

"I forgot," exclaimed Laming, as they turned the last and most crucial corner. "I haven't got any keys. I think we need two at least."

"Ellen lent me hers," said Helen. She had been carrying them, not in her

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handbag, but all the time in her hand. They were on a little ring, with a bauble added. Helen's gloves were white for the hot weather, and in lacelike net.

Helen and Laming were inside the flatlet. Helen sat on the huge divan, not pulling down her dress, as she usually did. Laming sat on one of the little white chairs, at once bedroom chairs and informal dinner-table chairs.

"What do you and Ellen usually do first?" asked Helen. She spoke as if she had kindly volunteered to help with the accounts.

"We talk for a bit," said Laming, unconvincingly though that was when everyone knew that Ellen seldom spoke at all.

"Well, let's do that," said Helen. "Surely it can do no harm if I take off my dress? I don't want to crumple it. You'd better take some things off too, in all this heat."

And, indeed, perspiration was streaming down Laming's face and body, like runnels trickling over a wasteland.

Helen had taken off her white shoes too.

"Do you like my petticoat?" she enquired casually. "It came from Peter Jones in Sloane Square. I don't think I've ever been in North London before."

"I like it very much," said Laming.

"It's serviceable, anyway. You could hardly tear it if you tried. Have you lived in North London all your life?"

"First in Hornsey Rise and then, after my father died, in Drayton Park."

"I adored my father, though he was very strict with me."

"So *your* father's dead too?"

"He allowed me no license at all. Will you be like that with your daughter, Laming, when the time comes?"

"I don't expect I'll ever have a daughter, Helen." Because of his leg, he would have liked a softer, lower chair and, for that matter, a more stoutly constructed one. But the springy, jumpy divan would not be the answer either, unles he were completely to recline on it, which would be injudicious.

"Do take something off, Laming. You look so terribly hot."

But he simply could not. Nor had he any knowledge of how men normally behaved, were called upon to behave, in situations such as this. Ellen had made all easy, but the present circumstances were very different, and of course Ellen herself was one of the reasons why they were different.

"I *am* looking forward to *Careless Rapture*," said Helen. "I adore Dorothy Dickson's clothes."

Laming had never to his knowledge seen Dorothy Dickson. "She's very fair, isn't she?" he asked.

"She's like a pretty flower bending before the breeze," said Helen.

"Isn't she married to a man named Souchong?"

"Heisen," said Helen.

"I thought it was *some* kind of tea."

"After a week without leaving the department, it's so wonderful to talk freely and intimately."

There it was! A week without leaving the department, and he had supposed himself to have seen her yesterday, and twice the day before, and all over London!

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As well as feeling hot and tortured, Laming suddenly felt sick with uncertainty; it was like the very last stage of *mal de mer,* and almost on an instant. Probably he had been feeling a little sick for some time.

"Laming!" said Helen, in her matter-of-fact way, "if I were to take off my petticoat, would you take off your coat and pullover?"

If he had spoken, he would have vomited, and perhaps at her, the flatlet being so minute.

"Laming! What's the matter?"

If he had made a dash for the bathroom, he would have been unable to stop her coming in after him, half-dressed, reasonable, with life weighed off — and more than ordinary people, it would seem, to judge by her excessively frequent appearances. So, instead, he made a dash for the staircase.

Holding in the sick, he flitted down the stairs. At least, he still had all the clothes in which he had entered.

"Laming! Darling! Sweetheart!"

She came out of the flatlet after him, and a terrible thing followed.

Helen, shoeless, caught her stockinged foot in the nailed-down landing runner and plunged the whole length of the flight, falling full upon her head on the hall floor, softened only by cracked, standard-colored linoleum. The peril of the fall had been greatly compounded by her agitation.

She lay there horribly tangled, horribly inert, perhaps with concussion, perhaps with a broken neck, though no blood was visible. Her petticoat was ripped, and badly, whatever the guarantee might have been.

Laming could well have been finally ill at that point, but the effect upon him was the opposite. He felt cold and awed, whatever the hall thermometer might show; and he forgot about feeling sick.

He stood trembling lest another tenant, lest the wife of a caretaker, intrude upon the scene of horror. There was a flatlet door at this ground-floor level, and a flight of stairs winding into the dark basement. But there was no further sound of any kind; in fact, a quite notable silence. It was, of course, a Saturday, the weekend.

Laming opened the front door of the house, as surreptitiously as one can do such a thing in bright sunlight.

There was no one to be seen in the street, and about eyes behind lace curtains there was nothing to be done before nightfall. Laming could scarcely wait until nightfall.

When outside the house, he shut the door quietly, resenting the click of the Yale-type fitment. He felt very exposed as he stood at the top of the four or five North London steps, like Sidney Carton on the scaffold, or some man less worthy.

He dropped down the steps and thereby hurt his leg even more. Nonetheless, he began to run, or perhaps rather to jogtrot. It was hot as Hell.

He cantered unevenly round the first corner.

And there stood Ellen; startled and stationary at his apparition. She was in a little blue holiday singlet, and darker blue shorts, plain and sweet. Apart from Ellen, that thoroughfare seemed empty too.

"Laming!"

She opened wide her arms, as one

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does with a child.

Matted and haggard, he stared at her. Then he determinedly stared away from her.

"I waited and waited. In the American Garden. Then I thought I'd better come on."

She was adorable in her playgirl rig, and so understanding, so truly loving.

But Laming was under bad influences. "Who's Kelly?" he asked.

"A friend," she replied. "But you haven't seen him."

He glared brazenly at the universe.

Then he pushed rudely past her, and all the way home his head sang a popular song to him, as heads do in times of trouble.

His Mother spoke with urgency. "Oh, Laming. I'm so glad to see you back."

He stared at her like a murderer who had the police car in the next street.

"You look tired. Poor Laming! It's a girl isn't it?"

He could only gaze at the floor. His leg was about to fall right off. His brain had gone rotten, like an egg.

"There's always the one you take, and the one you might have taken."

He continued to stare at the eroded lentil-colored carpet.

"Lie down and rest. I'll come back for you soon."

Agonizingly he flopped onto the hard chesterfield, with its mustard-and-cress covering, much worn down in places.

In the end, she was with him again. She wore a short-sleeved nightdress in white lawn, plain and pure. Her hair had long been quite short. She looked like a bride.

"It's too hot for a dressing gown," she said, smiling. He smiled wanly back.

"Let me help you to take your things off," she said.

And when they were in bed, her bed, with the windows open and the drawn blinds carelessly flapping, she seemed younger than ever. He knew that she would never change, never disappoint. She did not even need to be thought about.

"Laming," she said. "You know who loves you best of all."

He sank into her being.

His leg could be forgotten. The heat could be forgotten. He had sailed into port. He had come home. He had lost and found himself.

The F&SF Competition was squeezed out of this issue. Results of Competition 18 will appear in the May issue, on sale March 30.

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Ian Watson was born in 1943, graduated Oxford then taught in universities in Tanzania and Japan. He has been a full-time writer since 1976 and his novels include The Embedding *(runner-up for the John W. Campbell Memorial Award in 1974),* The Jonah Kit *and* The Martian Inca.

My Soul Swims In A Goldfish Bowl

by IAN WATSON

This terrible cough. It tears me apart every morning when I rise, like a dawn wind: the cold of morning meeting the warmth of the night and sucking it out of me. That's the picture I have of it, as though I'm sleeping in some yak tent on the high steppes somewhere, not in a town flat. It's been happening for over a week now: ten, fifteen minutes of convulsive, hacking strain, irritating to Mary, who thinks it's deliberate, a mannerism, a parody of middle years, a protest. It's all dry; nothing comes of it.

The Doctor tapped my chest last night, harkened to his stethoscope, peered down my throat. Nothing. Congestion? Something stuck in my windpipe? No. Tonsilitis? No. Digestive troubles, tickling the coughing reflex misleadingly? None that I've noticed. He has booked me for an X-ray, but the possibility remains, as Mary believes: habit spasm, hysteria. Myself doing it. To protest at something in our lives, in my life.

So it comes. In the bathroom, the awful hurricane from within. And I grip the firm white washbasin with both hands, as lungs implode and eyes bulge, as I shed tears of blood (so I fancy). Will I burst a blood vessel this time? Will I have a heart attack?

At at last, *at last,* this morning I do cough up something. Something quite large. Rotund, the size of a thumb nail. It lies squirming on the white enamel. Phlegm alive.

What is it? I wonder in disgust as the tears clear. Part of my lung? A living gob of lung, still breathing the air — fresher air out here than in my chest? It pulses gently, wobbles, throbs. It's alive. What on earth is it?

A cancer, a tumorous growth, still growing fresh cells, unaware that it has lost its host? Some other unknown parasite that has been living in me? Surely no such thing is known. Look, it still quivers with undoubted independent life.

An abortion, a thumbnail foetus

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has erupted not from the womb (which obviously I don't have) but from my chest, and rests there, still alive. Some spirit of sickness, finally exorcised, which my bloodshot overstrained eyes somehow perceive — in the style of some juju witchdoctor who spies out the soul of the disease. The Philippine faith healers supposedly pull impossibilities, nodules, out of the body to cure it... Have I, then, become a healer *in extremis?* Can I march up to sick people now, plunge my hand into their bellies and chests and tubes, and haul out their diseases, alive and squirming? I prod it with my finger. Wormlike, it contracts, bulging another way. Yes, it's a living being — or antibeing. Dare I wash it away? Or should I shuffle it into a matchbox, keep it prisoner?

I tap the plug into the sink, wash warm water in — and it floats, swims around like a sluggish tadpole.

"Mary! Come and see! I've coughed something up. It's alive."

She comes to the bathroom, then, and peers into the bowl.

"Can you see it, Mary? Here!" I poke it, and it tumbles over in the warm water, rights itself. "You do see it, don't you? Say you do. It came out of me just now. It lives."

"Oh I can see it."

"Maybe that's the spirit of the sickness. I've coughed it out at last?"

"It isn't that, Tom." She backs off, her expression diffident.

"Don't you realize? It's your soul. You've lost your soul."

"My... soul? You're joking! How can it be my soul?"

She retreats from me. Detaches herself. The bathroom is very white and clean and clinical, like a surgery. The thing in the sink circles, executes a flip.

"What else can it be, Tom? What else lives in you? What else could you lose?" She peers at me. "You're soulless now. The soul's quite a little thing, you see. It hides inside everyone. Nobody ever finds it, it's a master of disguise. It doesn't have to be all together so long as its atoms are spread out around the body in the right order, one in this cell, one in that. But yours has clotted together, it's condensed itself — and you've just ejected it. Lost it."

"But," I poke the thing gingerly, "what gives you such certainty? Such conviction!"

"You don't feel certainty any more? That's because you've lost the thing that gives conviction, faith, belief. *I know.* Because I still have mine, spread throughout the whole of me. But yours has been narrowing and congealing for months now. It went from your lips, your heart, your fingers. It went from your eyes, from your belly, from your penis. It's been retreating, pulling in on itself all these months. I know, dear."

"Supposing," I grip the bowl, "for the sake of argument this is my soul, do I scoop it up and gulp it down? Do I get it back inside me that way?"

The living object somersaults, ducks under water, surfaces lazily. It seems to have no particular sense organs or organs of any sort or limbs. It's all just one and the same thing. A living blob. Does it eat? Does it absorb energy?

"Can I reincorporate it?"

"Unlikely. It's too dense now. You'd only eat it, dissolve it in your

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stomach acids, excrete it out. Parents lose their children, mothers lose their babies from their wombs, you've lost your... Well," she shrugs, "it's gone its own way now, Tom. It's outside of you."

"Is this some cruel joke of yours? Do you really hate me so much? Have you been hating me all these years without telling me?"

"Hatred, dear, doesn't apply if the soul is gone; nor love. Besides, how could I possibly love or hate *that?* But life goes on, obviously. You'll have to look after it, Tom."

We have what used to be, once, a goldfish bowl on top of the drinks cabinet in the dining space; now a flower bowl with a posy of anemones, artificial ones of silk. The goldfish died, after a few months, of loneliness perhaps — if a fish can feel lonely. Of emptiness, and the horror of the empty world being so bent round upon itself. I can't very well flush my soul down the drain, like an abortion, can I? Even if there's only the merest suspicion that it really is my soul. So I take the bowl, laying the posy on the dining table — then rush back in panic in case Mary pulls the plug *on me.* My soul's still there. Mary's back in the bedroom, humming, putting on makeup. I scoop my soul carefully into the bowl, add more water, remove it to the safety of the drinks cabinet beside the little drum of daphnae, undiscarded year in year out. Do I feed it on daphnae? It appears not to possess a mouth.

"Mary — I've put it in the bowl. Please be careful, won't you? God, the time! Do I go to work on the day I lost my soul?"

"Don't worry, Tom, it'll be safe. Today's like any other. Better than a pet rock, isn't it — a pet soul?"

A pet. But it looks nothing like a pet, any more than an amoeba could be a pet. There it is, a huge amoeba, a-float, semi-mobile, doing its own thing oblivious to me. Goodbye, Soul, for now; I'll be home at six. Don't get bored, don't do anything I wouldn't do.

It circles, rotates, pulses a bit.

Mary will get her hair done, then pick up the food and wine for the meal tonight; Tony and Wanda Fitzgerald are coming round. Brittany artichokes, steak and strawberries I suppose.

So off to work I go. While my soul stays home.

If Mary put the bowl on the stove and heated the water up, I wonder would I feel the searing pains of being burnt alive? Agonies at a distance? I should have found a better place for the anemones.

However, no such agonies arrive. Indeed, all day long as I examine my sensations, I feel very little sensation indeed. I coast in neutral. Things get done. I entertain a client to lunch; does he notice that my soul is absent? Apparently not. I wonder whether other people really have souls at all — perhaps I was the only one? After lunch I call in on impulse at a church. I ring the confession bell, I pull the curtain. This is how I believe one goes about it. I've no practical experience of such things.

"Yes, my son?"

"Father, I'm sorry but I don't know the right routines. The formulas. What one does. I've never been in a confessional before —"

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"If you suddenly feel the call, plainly there's a need. What is it?"

"Father, I've lost my soul."

"No soul is ever lost to God, my son."

"Mine is lost. To me. Well, not exactly lost. No — I still have it in a sense, only it's not *in me* any more —"

Useless. I stumble out.

Work.

Home.

Mary's hair is exquisite, if overprecise. I smell the tarragon in the Breton sauce prepared for the artichoke leaves, and hurry to the drinks cabinet, heart thumping, absurdly fearful that my living soul is chopped into the sauce with the tarragon leaves. So vulnerable I feel with my soul detached from me; yet at the same time curiously I feel very little about it... But no. My soul still circles slowly there, aloofly. I prod it. It ducks, bobs up again, like jelly.

Tony and Wanda arrive. I pour gins and whiskies.

"Whatever's that?" asks Wanda, pointing.

Mary smiles brightly. "Oh that's Tom's soul."

Everyone giggles, even me.

We sit down. We eat, we drink. Conversation does its glassy best to glitter. Smoke fills the air. Mary places the bowl with my soul in it on the dining table as we drink coffee and some odd beetroot liqueur from Rumania. My soul circulates. Tony offers it a stuffed olive on a skewer, the olive being the same size as it is. It butts against it, declines the offering; how could it nibble it? When Tony withdraws the olive I look twice to ensure that by some sleight of hand he has not exchanged my soul on a skewer for an olive bobbing in the bowl. But all is well.

"It really is his soul, you know," says Mary. "But don't imagine it feels or thinks or does very much! It's just something that *is*."

"An essence. How existential," nods Tony. After a while my soul is relegated to the top of the cabinet again. Where it rotates, quite slowly, mutely in its bowl.

After a while longer its presence seems to overcast the evening; Tony and Wanda leave rather early, murmuring excuses. It's disconcerting to see someone's soul, looking just like that and no more. If only it was radiant, with wings! A hummingbird. A butterfly... But it isn't, alas. This miracle, this atrocity, this terrible event is too small and simply protoplasmic, too tadpole-like. Where is the amazement? Where is the awful revelation of loss? And this is why I know now, with absolute certainty, that my soul does indeed swim there in the bowl. Lost to me utterly; so utterly that not even a thread of awe or a spider's strand of sickness unto death can connect me to it.

Such is the nature of real loss, irreparable total loss; no possible attachment remains. So it is true that I am soulless; for there it is. Just that and no more.

While Mary rinses plates, I sit patiently watching it as it turns, and turns, limbless, eyeless, brainless, mouthless, turning nevertheless, occasionally ducking and bobbing in its tepid water in the bowl.

My soul, oh my soul.

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Richard Cowper (a pen name for John Middleton Murry, Jr.) was born in 1926 and now lives in South Wales. His novels include Clone, Kuldesak *and* The Twilight of Briareus. *Mr. Cowper's stories for F&SF have almost all been enthusiastically received, the most recent being "The Hertford Manuscript," (October 1976), the most popular probably "Piper At The Gates of Dawn," (March 1976), a Hugo and Nebula runner-up.*

Drink Me, Francesca

by RICHARD COWPER

"There was a time," observed Doctor Sukano, "when the one thing which no astronaut was supposed to carry with him above the ionosphere was the very thing which gave him the right to be there. How many of you know what that was?"

The 4th Year History seminar assumed a collectively pensive expression and it was left to Amanda Oxley to offer tentatively: "His humanity, sir?"

"Very well, Amanda. And just how would you define that for us?"

"I don't think it's possible, sir. I mean — well, other than as an amalgam of the qualities which go to make us human."

"Such as courage? fortitude? intelligence? cruelty? lust for power?" Sukano suggested mildly.

The class laughed dutifully.

Amanda flushed but was not deflected. "Well, benevolence, for one," she countered. "And kindness of heart, and... and tenderness of character."

"Well done," said Doctor Sukano, underlining his approval with a nod. "In a word "sensibility." Now I want you all to turn to page 24 of Lucas & Trench."

The leaves riffled over and the class gazed at the double page spread of illustrations taken from the covers of various internationally popular science-fiction magazines circa A.D. 1930-1950.

"Have you all found it?"

They nodded.

"Now, as you will probably have realized, these curious productions of 20th Century Volkskultur have a good deal in common with those Medieval woodcuts from Trossach's *Demonologie* which we were looking at last term. Technically they are more sophisticated but not necessarily more forceful. Fundamentally they are symbolic representations of infantile power fantasy — hence predominantly sexual in origin. Note the blatantly phallic space ships in figures '4' and '6'; the grossly distorted anatomy wherever a female is por-

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trayed; the equally exaggerated muscularity of the males; the invariably grotesque aliens."

He allowed them to contemplate the illustrations curiously for a minute or two.

"Now keep a marker in there and turn on to page 32 — the two illustrations captioned 'Cygnus Missions.' I want you to take a close look at the one on the left hand side, "Cygnus I. 1993." The quality of the reproduction is rather poor but you will be able to see the point I wish to make. How many of them are there? Fifteen? Of those, six were finally selected. All excellent physical specimens. All male. All white. All mated heterosexuals. Most with two-plus off-spring. But every one indisputably cast from the same matrix that supplied the male fantasy archetypes for those magazine covers. I'm sure you can all see what I mean."

The class turned from one page to the other and nodded.

"Fundamentally," Sukano continued, "it is a late Victorian military stereotype brought up to date to accommodate the explosive advance of technology. Every age has had its ideal man and woman; the irony is that by the end of the 20th Century that ideal had become so far divorced from common reality as to be virtually unrecognizable. As a species we were suffering from a corporate loss of identity of a kind which we in the west had not experienced since the sack of Rome in 410 A.D. Is it not extraordinary that it was in this lamentable condition — this psychological and spiritual vacuum — that mankind elected to light out for the stars?"

A hand lifted. "Sir. Why were no women included in the Cygnus crews?"

"Principally because, at that time, the Civil Space Programme was an extension of the Military Space Programme, and war, as you well know, was an essentially male preoccupation. Furthermore the enormous sums necessary for the financing of the star projects were obtainable only through the National Defence Budgets. The administration of those funds rested as it had always done, firmly in the hands of the military. The last strongholds of male hegemony in the western world were to be found in the Pentagon and its European equivalents. The only word that can possibly be said in favour of the authorities is that they sincerely believed they were doing the right thing. In their choice of crews for the two Cygnus Missions they endeavoured to select men who approached that ideal which they perceived to be enshrined within themselves. The first Mission was composed of six officers of impeccable pigmentation, patriotism, proven courage, technical expertise, physical superiority, and psychological stability. Imagination was conspicuous only by reason of its absence. In short our first ambassadors in space were a handful of white male mesomorphs as corporately unrepresentative of the human race as a whole as it would be possible to conceive, though at that time, of course, the exact opposite would have been held to be true.

"The fifteen man crew of the second Mission — Cygnus II, launched in 1998 as the consolidating counterpart to Cygnus I — conformed to the same

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basic pattern. However, the crushing financial burden of mounting these massive expeditions had led to a more international crew being chosen. In place of the All-White, North American, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant *corps élite* which had manned Cygnus I, Cygnus II carried a discreet leavening in the form of five members of other races and other nations. Roughly speaking, their numbers and nationalities were in direct ratio to the financial contributions of their respective governments. Needless to say the fundamental human pattern remained much as before. A cursory glance at the illustration on the right hand page will make that abundantly clear.

"On page 33 you will find the tabulated and summarized biographies of the Cygnus II crew. I wish to draw your attention briefly to the last column — that headed 'Interests.' Have you got it?"

The class nodded.

"It's worth our taking a glance at this because it ought to tell us something about them. So let's run a finger down the list and see what we've got. Golf and flying: football and skeet-shooting: chess and ham-radio: baseball and hunting: golf and hang-gliding: tennis and fishing: football and scuba diving: music and art: hunting and electronics: baseball and horse riding: shooting and football: golf and Go: gliding and ice-hockey: judo and model engineering: and, finally, tennis and golf. Well now, given your knowledge of 20th Century social pastimes and the parameters of the Cygnus Mission, do any of those strike you as being in any sense 'suspect' within your terms of reference?"

"Music and art, sir?" suggested several voices.

"Yes, it stands out, doesn't it? A distinct lack of competitive aggression there. But perhaps this is just the wisdom of hindsight. However, it is interesting to reflect that Peter Mahler joined the crew only at the eleventh hour. He was back-up to a Captain Hans Rabel who was found to have developed a heart murmur and was dropped at the last minute.

"But it is not really the psychological strengths or weaknesses of Mahler which concern us today — other than as a rather fascinating footnote to the work you will be examining during the coming week. I draw your attention to him, and to the membership of the crew of the Cygnus II, because I believe it is most important not to lose sight of our historical perspectives when we are studying works of this period. After all, the gulf which separates us from the early 21st Century can be bridged only by an intense effort of the historical imagination. What seems quaint — or even incomprehensible — to us today, was by no means either quaint or incomprehensible to our ancestors. Take a word like 'Xenophobia' for instance. Does anyone know what it meant? Yes?"

"Morbid fear of foreigners, sir?"

"Very good, Roger. That is exactly what it did mean."

There were muted murmurs of disbelief from some other members of the class.

"Oh, it's perfectly true," Sukano assured them with a smile. "Furthermore, not only was the word in common

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use in English but it could be found in some form in practically every language on the earth. Though naturally we were unaware of it at the time, we humans possessed the doubtful distinction of having evolved into the most terrified race in all our sector of the galaxy. We were frightened of almost everything. Indeed we even went to the lengths of devising sophisticated psychological theories which justified our fear as being to our own evolutionary advantage. Fear, we maintained, was vital to species survival."

At this the whole class erupted into spontaneous laughter in which Doctor Sukano himself joined.

When their mirth had subsided he said: "You will understand why I doubt if today it is possible for even the most gifted historian to make more than a purely token identification with the protagonist of *The Mahler Report*. The point is that unless we make an attempt to do so we can never hope to comprehend fully its true significance as an historical document. So you must all make that effort. I should perhaps point out that the only section of the *Report* which was actually *written* by Mahler was the ending. The rest was voice-recorded."

Sukano glanced up at the water-clock and then smiled around at his class. "Are there any further questions?"

The student who had known the word 'Xenophobia' raised his hand. "Sir," he said, "just how much of the *Report* is accepted as *fact?*"

Doctor Sukano looked as if he were about to frame a direct answer to the question then, obviously, changed his mind. "Well, let's make that our starting point for next week's discussion," he said. "I shall be fascinated to hear your opinions."

* * * *

The Mahler Report.

So we're on our own at last, Francesca. Corbin and Tollard rejoined the ship an hour ago. By now they're probably processing their data and having bets with themselves as to how many colonists this area can be persuaded to support. A million? Two million? Hurrah for *Lebensraum!* Still, I might as well confess I felt something pretty close to a twinge of envy as I watched the little crab lift off. But by the time the dust had settled and the echoes had died away that extraordinary sense of absolute tranquility had reasserted itself, flowing in upon me from the hills and forests like a cool, invisible tide. The sheer beauty of this place would take your breath away. To see it only in terms of just another potential colony fills me with a profound depression.

I knew that I ought to make an immediate start (all good Starmen work first and play later — or, better, never!) but after a token check that the radio was functioning correctly I turned my back on the camp, wandered over to the ruins, found myself a nice shady spot by the canal steps and sat down.

Have you ever tried thinking of nothing, Francesca? I mean *really* nothing. Just letting yourself *be*. It's incredibly difficult. And it's a hundred times *more* difficult when the whole of your life's conditioning is screaming at you that this is just what you shouldn't be doing, that you're failing in your duty. Duty! God, how I'm getting to

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loathe that word! Not that that bothered me. After all, haven't I spent the last two years learning how to compromise — strike bargains with my conscience — short-circuit my super-ego? Now all I wanted to do was simply to switch off everything that had the slightest bearing on the Mission. But *everything*. No more ratiocination: no more irritable reaching after fact and reason: just absorb with my basic animal senses: become a pure receptacle for impressions: be.

I couldn't do it. And it struck me then that inside all our heads there's a complete, self-motivated, microcosmic bureaucracy at work. The more we consciously relax, the more frantic the separate departments become, each one frantically coding, classifying, processing, reflecting and, above all, *worrying*. They're in a perpetual state of near panic. But about *what?* Will you believe me, Francesca, when I tell you I even caught one little subsection busily calculating my *mortgage payments!* There I was, God knows how many lightyears out beyond Eridanus, and some crumby little circuit in my cortex was still back there in Stuttgart dickering with Schnelling across his desk in the Global and Providential!

So I tried another way. I shifted down the stone steps into the sunlight, stretched out flat on my back and let the fingers of my right hand trail unseen in the cool, green water. As I did so I said out aloud: "O.K. you bastards, get to work on that."

The words had scarcely left my lips before a screaming alert was being issued to all physical systems. "*Alligators! Piranhas! Moray eels!*" — all translated, naturally, into some sort of Asylian equivalents which, as we well know, do not exist. Nevertheless, such was Starman Mahler's superb mental conditioning that he jack-knifed up, whipped his hand out of the water and looked to see if his fingers hadn't been trimmed off at the knuckle by some ferocious predator.

Then — and this really *was* crazy, Francesca — our intrepid Starman lay down on his stomach, cupped up as much water as he could into his hands *and drank it!* He did that three or four times and then he propped his chin in his hands and stared down at his own dripping reflection. They grinned at each other and both said simultaneously: "You just don't bloody well care any more, do you?"

Who names planets? Do you know, Francesca? Well, to be precise, who named Asylia? It's a pretty good name — a hell of a lot better than 'C.I. 22 (N.G. 2132/3)' which is how it first appeared in the lists as the twenty-second potentially habitable world discovered by Starship 'Cygnus I' while investigating the third planet out in the system associated with the fourth magnitude star labelled 2132 in the National Geographic Star Catalogue. But how did anyone get Asylia out of that lot? I bet it wasn't their computer. Maybe the crew simply took it in turns to choose a name. If so, I wonder who hit upon Asylia.

Hi there! Sorry if I've neglected you. Just got my priorities back to front as usual. I've been spending the last two days slaving away dutifully on the in-

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scriptions. I'm about halfway round the second pedestal. And the lamentable truth is I'd have been off snapping away busily right now only there's too much cloud about. Most of the exposed panels are so weather-worn that I need all the help I can get from the oblique light to bring the relief out to the point where the design registers. As far as I can make out there are at least three distinct scripts which I'm calling 'High,' 'Median' and 'Low' just for my own convenience. So far all my attempts to reach even a vague approximation to their historical age have proved totally ludicrous. To date my radio-active decay readings taken from odd scraps of mortar have given me a span ranging from .9 million to 10,000! Every single reading I take seems to give me a different figure. What am I supposed to make of it when *the same specimen of material* has twice given me readings differing by approximately *a quarter of a million years?* It's almost as if the stuff is saying: "Well, what shall we offer Dr. Mahler this time? A thousand? Half a million?" It's so crazy that I've just about given up monitoring the print-outs. Yet the weird thing is I'm almost certain that the machine is functioning perfectly within its ordained parameters. It's as if it's trying to tell me something in a language I can't even *begin* to comprehend. I've reported it to Dieterling and he's simply written it off as 'malfunction.' Typical.

When I haven't been occupied on the reliefs I've been sculling around trying to match up the aerial survey prints of the site with some ground level observations. I'm pretty certain I've identified the main citadel and a couple of the ancillary settlements — if that's what they are. The area between the temple and the foothills would engage a full archaeological team for a century. And that's the very spot Tollard singled out for 'prime urban development!' I suspect the occupation levels go down for millennia. There's one place where the stream that feeds the canal has undercut a steep bank, and while I was scratching around there in the gravel yesterday evening I turned up a miniature chalcedony *aryballus* — my guess is that the material's some variety of chrysoprase. It may not be an *aryballus* at all but that's what it looks like to me. It's flat-bottomed, about eight inches tall, stoppered, fluted neck, two little handles at its waist, and decorated with an incised relief of the most exquisite subtlety based on the familiar lizard motif. There's not a flaw in it anywhere. Just out of curiosity I took a dating on a minute sample of the ash inside and came up with — guess what? — *1.8 million years!* Back in the Rift Australeopithicus is shuffling across the Pleistocene savannahs and out here some unknown genius is producing the sort of sublime artefact that would have our National Museums competing to put themselves in hock for life. Mind you, I half suspect that if I were idiotic enough to run off a second reading today I might well come up with a figure closer to a week last Wednesday!

Apart from the odd bird, the sole sign of animal life is still the geckos. They scamper about over the ruins and seem to be absolutely without fear. My only problem with them is that they are

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incorrigibly curious. No sooner have I lined up my equipment on a section of a pedestal than half a dozen of them will emerge out of nowhere, scuttle up into the precise area I'm working on and look around at me as if to say: "Is this about right? Or would you prefer me a little further over to the left? You have only to say." I tried lifting them out of the way but by the time I'd done it and then got back into position they'd be right back there again. Or maybe it was their buddies. It got to the point where I was down to about a couple of yards an hour and most of those frames have a gecko or two in them somewhere.

It wasn't until yesterday that it dawned on me that I'd been making the false assumption that they *were* geckos. It was an obvious enough error in the circumstances because outwardly that is exactly what they are — little house-lizards with adhesive pads on their toes — but I suspect that the similarity ends there. What happened was this. I was lining up for the third panel of the second pedestal when the usual audience started to assemble. There was quite a lot of broken cloud about and I had to seize my moments as they came. The geckos got the idea at once. No sooner was there a gleam of sun than there they were lined up in the frame as smug and self-satisfied as a Rotarian lunch party. I bawled at them and waved my waved my arms and then, suddenly, they vanished. Nothing simpler, except that I'd been bawling and waving my arms at them for the past two days with no effect whatsoever. So what had happened?

It wasn't until I'd finished my work for the day and they still hadn't reappeared that I got round to thinking about it. And then, of course, it struck me. I'd been *angry* with them — genuinely *furious* — for the first time! So much so that I'd even toyed with the idea of fetching my gas gun and letting them have it. I'd never have done it, of course, but the *thought* was there. As soon as I remembered it I felt utterly mortified — uncouth. My sense of shame, of absolute self-disgust, seemed out of all proportion to my transgression — if that is what it was. I say 'seemed' but deep down inside me I knew that it wasn't. Quite the contrary. My sin was not that I'd been guilty of committing an obscenity *but that I hadn't even been aware that I was doing it!*

To say I felt humiliated would be an all-time understatement. Yet who would have understood me? In the Mission's terms I had behaved not only with restraint but perfectly normally — indeed, naturally. That was the rub. I, Peter Mahler, Starman, *crème-de-la-crème,* product of five thousand years of terrestrial culture had shown himself to be little better than an anthropoid barbarian. And yet (with the possible and always honourable exception of Igo Umati) I'm certain that I was the only one of the whole Mission who could even *begin* to comprehend it. I had a sudden numbing vision of trying to explain what I felt — what I *knew* — to Tollard, or Talbot, or even Dieterling, and I wished I could find myself a deep hole and crawl into it and stay there until the Last Trump sounded.

Over-reaction? I don't believe it, Francesca. And I spent the next three hours trying to think of some way of —

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well, not of *atoning* exactly, because I don't see how that would be possible — but of letting them know that at least I'm *aware* of what I've done. The trouble is, as I see it, that what they had reacted to was an emotive emission on a purely subconscious level. So how do I possibly convey a message to them saying: "Come back. All is forgiven." or rather: "Please come back and try to forgive *me*?" If they operate on that sort of fundamental level what chance have I of *ever* being able to convince them? Men, especially Starmen, don't know *how* to feel humble. Are we not the Masters of our Fates, the Captains of our Souls, the God-selected *conquistadores* bearing our beads, our bombs and our Bourbon as we descend from on high to con or cow the simple natives, appropriate their worlds and spread the heavenly treasure of our *Technokultur* into the far flung corners of the galaxy? When you realize that's the sort of shit we've been nurtured on all our lives, Francesca, isn't it probable that by now our collective and individual subconscious must positively reek of it?

Maybe I got it all wrong, Francesca. I hope so. The fact is I went out to start work on the fourth pedestal this morning and there they all were again just as if nothing had happened. I set up the cameras, took my readings and then went and squatted down in front of the reliefs and said: "Look, friends, I'm sorry. I really am deeply, profoundly ashamed of what happened yesterday. But I've learnt my lesson, you understand? O.K. Now listen carefully. I've *got* to take pictures of these pedestals — of *your* pedestals. That's my assignment and I'm stuck with it. These pictures will be coded and tachybeamed back home and one day a lot of clever people will set to work to try to decipher them and read what they say. But to do that I have to have pictures without you and your friends grinning in the foreground." I stretched out my finger and traced the outline of the area I hoped to work in. "Now would you please, *please* just keep outside those limits till I've done? Afterwards I'll line you all up and we'll have a group picture — yes, even one with me in it, if that's what you want. But just for now, be my friends and let me get on with the reliefs, hey?"

I squatted there and looked at them and they looked at me and suddenly the whole set-up struck me as so sublimely crazy that I started to laugh — real, deep down belly laughing that stemmed from God knows where — out of simple affection for them, I suppose. One thing for sure, there was nothing *conscious* about it. I just rocked around hooting away till the tears spouted and then I tottered back to the camera, wiped my eyes, and peeked into the viewfinder. And what do you think? Every square inch of that relief had a lizard on it! They were lined up in ranks like a parade of hussars. There must have been a couple of hundred of them and they were all looking directly at me and grinning. That's just the way they look normally though. I took half a dozen pictures and then said: "O.K. That's your lot." And when I looked again there wasn't a solitary gecko on that part of the relief I'd marked out. At which point the sun went in. That

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wasn't their fault though. But what *am* I supposed to make of it?

The current theory is that the Asylian civilization was some sort of primitive equivalent of our own Mayan which somehow either just petered out or was totally destroyed, leaving behind a few ruins and some traces of an undecipherable language to tease us out of thought. Thus does one culture seek to interpret another in its own terms. All progress must always be towards ever greater social complexity. Anything else is, *ipso facto*, degeneration. But *is it*, Francesca? I wish I could believe it. Indeed part of me *does* believe it. After all it is what I was taught. Can't you just hear old Bruder! —

— Nonsense, Mahler! Progress is — ach, *progress!* And we all know what that is, don't we?

— Yes, sir. Progress is the advance towards ultimate perfection. In *homosapiens* it is expressed through the urge to dominate.

— Exactly. Very good, Mahler. And how is this dominion to be made manifest?

— By the exercise of God-like power, sir. Power over the forces of Nature and over the lives of inferior species. Werner Bertholtz has expressed it as 'the augmentation of a society's ability to inculcate awe in its adversaries.'

— Excellent, my boy.

— But, sir, isn't it conceivable that a society might develop a very high standard of culture and yet remain in all other essentials what we should call primitive?

— No, Mahler, it is *not* possible. For why? Because then it would be vulnerable to attack from its enemies.

— But supposing it didn't *have* any enemies, sir.

— That, Mahler, is impossible.

— Why, sir?

— Mahler, you are either a genius or a fool and you are certainly no no genius. If a society did not have enemies, not only would it cease to be a society, it would in all probability never have become one in the first place. In the unlikely event that it had it would inevitably disintegrate, collapse, vanish. Fear, Mahler, is the mortar that binds together the bricks of civilization. Make a note of that, my boy, and commit it to memory.

A world without fear, Francesca. *Is* it conceivable? Professor Bruder wouldn't have thought so. But Professor Bruder isn't here on Asylia. But then neither are the Asylians. What happened to them? What were they like? Did they dance, sing, weep, laugh, make love? If I could have met one would we have recognized each other? And why must I persist in thinking of them in *human* terms? Dieterling would say that it's because we, as human beings, can conceive only in terms of our own human experience — anything else is, literally, unimaginable. I can see his point, of course, but what if we approach it from a different angle altogether? What if we try substituting 'feel' for 'think.' Where does that get us? Well, I certainly didn't *think* my feelings for those geckos, I *felt* them. And they apparently got the message.

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Then why can't I reciprocate? Or did I? Was that sudden upwelling of affection *for* them a transmission *from* them? You know, Francesca, I have the weirdest feeling that I'm stumbling around on the brink of a concept so vast and yet so simple that I just can't *dare* to contemplate it.

Listen to this, Francesca. Lifeless matter progresses to become animate matter: animate matter progresses and achieves consciousness: consciousness ultimately emerges into a state of self-awareness. *Ecce homo! Cogito, ergo sum!* Those are the steps we see leading upwards towards civilization. And then? Ah, what then, Francesca? Is it really nothing more than an endless process of refining and accretion? We know that within ourselves we still carry the detritus of each of those laborious upward steps. The human foetus is a living history of our journey. We are a compound of all that we have been — atoms, molecules, elements on the one hand; and on the other, what? Something, some nebulous quality that advances step by step alongside the increase of physical complexity; something we have chosen to call rationality — the ability to think, to objectify. This, we say, is what has driven us out here among the stars. But just suppose that at each step there were other paths of progression — even a path of illogicality perhaps — or of intuition — or of *ap*prehension as opposed to *com*prehension. Then let's suppose that at some point — say where animate matter is evolving into consciousness — what if at that point the emergent creature becomes aware that there are other possible ways upward, and instead of choosing the one we took, decides to go for another? In time would their rational intelligence become as vestigial in *our* terms as our own intuition would be in *theirs*? And, just supposing something of the sort *had* happened, what might they have evolved into by now? Presumably into something all but inconceivable to a rational human mind. How else could we interpret it other than as a progressive regression? — as the ultimate evolutionary abnegation! *Or is that how they would view us?*

This afternoon I finished my work on the last of the pedestals and decided to use up the rest of the film on the *aryballus*. I needed a neutral, non-reflective background and I'd come to the conclusion that the canal steps would serve the purpose admirably. I went back to the camp, collected the jar and was carrying it back to the place I'd selected when I suddenly realized that I was walking in the wrong direction. I put it down to simple absent-mindedness — I'd been preoccupied with camera angles and problems of stereoscopic gradation — and I turned round in my tracks and started to retrace my steps.

I don't suppose I'd taken more than three or four paces before I became overwhelmed by the sudden conviction that I was making a profound mistake. It was purely instinctive — a sort of subliminal message which presented itself to my conscious mind as a series of rapidly alternating postulates along the lines that I'd chosen the wrong site; that the light was unsuitable; that I

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ought to be thinking in terms of ultra-violet and infra-red. And yet somehow I suspected that all this was no more than a translation being proffered to my intellect because it would be immediately comprehensible. The unmistakable, underlying message was 'DON'T.'

I looked down at the *aryballus*. The sunlight seemed to fluoresce within it until it glowed like a tiger's eye, cool and green and infinitely mysterious. It became instantly obvious to me that no stereograph, however skilful, could do more than convey a ghostly travesty of its quality. What I was holding in my hands was a quintessential work of art: perfect: complete in itself: unique: a statement of an eternal truth. And it was then that I became conscious of a profound dichotomy within myself: I was seeing the *aryballus* in terms of human aesthetics; but at the same time I was *feeling about it* as an Asylian might perhaps have felt; as though the thing had a life — a consciousness even — of its own; that it was in itself something immeasurably more significant than just a supremely beautiful artefact.

I set it down gently in the sand, sat down cross-legged in front of it and contemplated it. I was convinced that it held a message for me if only I could somehow contrive to suppress my rational human self to the point where I could hear what it had to say to me. To do that meant having to activate within myself senses — modes of perception — which my intelligence told me I did not possess. Nevertheless I knew that I *had* to make the attempt. You can understand that, can't you, Francesca? Well, of course you can, but I suspect you may well be the only person who ever will.

How long did I sit there? Two hours? Three? I was vaguely aware that the sun was sliding down behind the hills at my back; that the clouds above me were turning ruby red; that my own shadow was stealing across the sand towards the *aryballus*. As it crept closer I noticed a subtle change was taking place, though whether this alteration was in the urn itself or in my own perception of it I was by then in no condition to judge. What I perceived was that although the background landscape was becoming dim and shadowy, the *aryballus* itself was undoubtedly becoming brighter — the extraordinary cat's eye quality of inward luminescence was intensifying in direct counter-proportion to the encroaching darkness. The urn was glowing like some strange and cloudy emerald, while within its depths smoky shadows seemed to slide and shift like underwater currents. The effect was so extraordinarily hypnotic that I felt — how can I convey it to you? — as though some thread, some invisible filament, was reaching out from inside myself towards it — or being *drawn* towards it — so that for a moment I was conscious of occupying a point in physical space somewhere between my own inert body and the *aryballus* itself. It was at that precise moment that I heard the imperious chirrup of the radio signal. The spell was broken. I unfolded my cramped legs, tottered to my feet and lurched off like a drunkard towards the camp. As I did so I was astonished to observe that scores of geckos had quit the shelter of the ruins and were congregated in a

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wide crescent across the sand at my back. One and all they appeared to be gazing raptly at the glowing urn.

The call was from Dieterling, worried because I hadn't reported in. I made what excuses I could and told him I'd finished my work on the pedestals. I didn't mention the *aryballus*. He told me they would pick me up at around noon tomorrow and that he had a further brief assignment for me at the *ziggurat* on the central plateau. If I hadn't been so disorientated I would have pleaded to have been left where I was for a while longer, but by the time I'd thought of it it was already too late.

Theope and Leucus, Asylia's twin moons, were both rising as I made my way back to the *aryballus*. A thin, silvery tissue of low cloud or mist had gathered like a scarf of gossamer across the shoulders of the northern hills and the moons seemed to float upwards through it like two brilliant bubbles of coloured glass, drifting silently on up towards the unfamiliar constellations and the twinkling skeins of stardust. The vision was so magical it hurt. I really mean that, Francesca. I felt it like a physical ache inside me; a sense of loss and sadness so poignant that I can't even begin to describe it. Unless, that is, you can understand what I mean when I say that I felt myself to be on the outside looking in: that between me and that Arcadian, moon-bewitched landscape there was a gulf fixed — an invisible, intangible barrier like that which must forever divide the vision of innocence from the eye of experience. Perhaps banished Adam felt the way I did as he glanced back over his shoulder and had his last glimpse of the vanishing vales of Eden.

And then I crested the slight rise and came within sight of the *aryballus*. It was still there, still glowing, still fringed by its strange, rapt little audience. I picked my way carefully among them and sat down in front of it again. Perhaps there was still hope.

For a while nothing happened and then, I don't know how exactly, I realized that something *had* happened, *was happening*. But it was all taking place inside myself. How do I even begin to convey it to you? Perhaps only by saying that it was as if I could feel some tight, constricting carapace in which I had been sheathed beginning to crack, to loosen. Try imagining a chrysalis in the first stages of its translation into an imago. Imagine that chrysalis to be intellectually conscious of the transformation it finds itself undergoing — dimly aware that it is part of some mysterious but wholly irreversible process of becoming, of transfiguration, of evolving into a new entity which may well be totally unimaginable in chrysalis terms. Well that, roughtly, is how I felt.

All I know for certain was that what I was experiencing was directly connected with the *aryballus* — or, rather, *through* the *aryballus*. But that was all. The *aryballus* was the link, the intellectual conduit, if you like, through which I was able to pass. For me it was the crack in the barrier of perception. No longer was I on the outside. *There was no outside!* I was a part of it as it was part of me. The old husk dropped away and understanding broke over me like a foaming cascade of revelation. I

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glanced down; saw my familiar body sitting there on the sand; saw my own two moon-shadows; and heard a voice say: *Welcome.*

I say "heard," Francesca, because that was the form in which the greeting was presented to my consciousness. I am quite sure that no sound, as we understand it, was ever uttered.

Could it have been the geckos?

My unspoken thought produced a sort of faint, shimmering exhalation in the cool night air — the almost literal ghost of a smile.

We have no physical entity in your sense. Such as we had we lost (discarded? outgrew?) long ago when we entered the — a prolonged hiatus — *communion (republic?) of the metapsychic. Come.*

I look down. Ten thousand miles below me the sapphire sickle which is Asylia hangs suspended against the interstellar darkness. The Cygnus is a silver mote against the backdrop of infinity. *Come.*

Annihilating brilliance. Seething immensity. Gargantuan whirlpools of inchoate matter. Flux. Nuclear energy becoming heat and light. The blinding photosphere of Asylia's sun. *Come.*

Stillness. Far off one tilted, glittering medallion. A spiral nebula. At its centre a pool of Stygian darkness. *A norn. Come.*

Velvet blackness faintly pricked with remote stars which I know to be not stars themselves but each one a clustering myriad of stars. I sense a tremor in the unimaginable vastness. A spring of pure energy bubbling. *The norn. Come.*

A pattern: a visual harmonic: an infinitely complex web of divine filigree endlessly altering, always constant, utterly unknowable. *The Supreme Paradox. Know Thyself. Come.*

The canal. Theope and Leucus glimmering like globed lanterns in the scarcely moving water. I look down. I have no reflection. What am I?

What is it you wish to be?

One who seeks the truth.

There is no truth. There is only the search for it.

Then how do we seek it?

Revere all life. Learn to perceive.

Can you help us?

Yes. If it is devoutly wished.

Then you already know us.

We know you.

Who are you?

You are what we ourselves might have become. You are those who know but do not understand. Soon you will destroy yourselves. It happens.

Is it too late?

We shall see. Farewell.

All around me the cooling desert is full of whispers. The *aryballus* has become a slim silver teardrop frozen in the moonlight. It no longer glows. The geckos have vanished. Only my heart remains full of joy and brimming over. Drink me, Francesca.

* * * *

The 4th Year History class filed into the seminar, bowed to Doctor Sukano, slipped off their shoes and settled quietly down. On the low table before him Sukano had placed a shallow ceramic dish. In the dish was arranged a single spray of white cherry blossom. The afternoon light slanted in upon it from the open window and the still

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water picked up and transmitted the twin reflections of the April sky and the cloudlike clusters of the snowy petals.

For perhaps as long as three minutes, or maybe even five, the class simply sat around on the semi-circle of scattered cushions. They evinced no signs of either embarrassment or boredom. Finally Sukano bowed, first to the dish of blossom and then to his class. He smiled. "I seem to recall that last week's session concluded on a note of interrogation. Would somebody be kind enough to refresh my memory?"

One or two students glanced covertly at Roger Tate. He nodded. "Yes, sir. I asked just how much of *The Mahler Report* was accepted as fact."

"So you did, Roger. And I suggested that would make a good starting point for our discussion this week. Well, what do you all think?"

"Why, sure it's true," said Amanda Oxley. "I mean — well, we all know it *happened.*"

"But *how* do we know?" Roger demanded. "Maybe Mahler just made it all up. Maybe he didn't really *do* any of those things. Maybe *no one* did. We don't *know*, do we? I mean he didn't come *back*, did he? None of them did."

He addressed himself to Doctor Sukano who only smiled his familiar, cryptic smile and glanced round to elicit the views of the others.

A blonde girl with an intense and faintly troubled expression said: "I confess myself puzzled by Francesca. I do not feel that she existed. I think that perhaps Peter Mahler imagined her."

"I think someone imagined Mahler," muttered Roger.

"Maybe someone's imagining you," suggested an unidentified voice.

"Well, maybe they are at that," said Roger.

"According to my notes," said another student, "the *Report* was picked up simultaneously in Melbourne, Hokkaido, Houston and Irkutsk on August 4th/5th, 2032. It was the first deep-space communication they had received from Cygnus II for over three years. It came in just as we've read it and it was the last direct contact ever established."

"Yes, and that's another thing," said Roger. "What happened to all those pictures Mahler was supposed to be taking? How come all we get is this *Report?* What happened to all the rest of the stuff? There were fifteen trained specialists out there all beavering away exploring the cosmos, mapping, measuring, testing, sampling, analysing, and yet all we ever get back is this."

"So you agree that it *did* come back?" said Amanda.

"All right, all right, Amanda, I'll grant you that. It came back."

"It wasn't just cooked up in Moscow or Washington?"

"No. But it could have been."

The blonde girl, whose name was Frauke Andersen, said: "*Did* Francesca exist, Doctor?"

"In Roger's sense, no, she did not," said Doctor Sukano. "That has been clearly established. She was the infant daughter Mahler left behind him. She died eight months after the Cygnus II passed into hyper-drive. But, in Mahler's sense, of course she *did* exist. Francesca was his conduit of communion. Without her there would have been no *Report*. In talking to her Mahler

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talks to himself and to us."

"And Asylia?"

"NG 2132/3 certainly exists. The temple ruins which Mahler speaks of were first photographed by a reconnaissance satellite from Cygnus I in 1997."

An Ethiopian student named Ebu Makoa said: "Mahler's analysis of evolutionary progress culminating in what he called 'the ultimate abnegation' must have appeared insane at the time. How did people react to it?"

"They were both mystified and profoundly shocked," said Sukano. "In fact, for several weeks that section of the *Report* — along with several others — was suppressed in the United States and the Soviet Union. Fortunately, in spite of intense political pressure, the full text was leaked by Professor Ko in Tokyo in September 2032, and by Somers in Melbourne a week later."

"But what were the others frightened of?"

"The unknown. The unknowable. Evidence of an alien intelligence infinitely superior to their own. Principally, fear itself. As Mahler himself points out they were conditioned to conceive of aliens only in negative human terms of aggression, exploitation and domination. If this Report was to be accepted at its face value. *Homo sapiens* was, to their way of thinking, a doomed species. Furthermore, a number of material factors appeared to substantiate the authentic nature of the *Report* — notably the faultless quality of the reception itself. Professor Ko was not alone in drawing attention to the fact that the sheer complexity of the transmission constituted almost irrefutable evidence of a total mastery of deep-space communication techniques unimaginably superior to anything hitherto available to the crew of Cygnus II.

"Within a very short period the scientific world had divided itself into two camps — pro-Mahler and anti-Mahler. The Antis dismissed the whole *Report* as an elaborate hoax: the Pros accepted it at its face value. It is intriguing to note that the arguments advanced on both sides were curiously similar to those put forward during the Huxley/Wilberforce debate which followed upon the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. The difference being, of course, that now the 'Orthodox' view was as passionately anti-Mahler as, in 1860, it had been passionately anti-Darwin."

Doctor Sukano proceeded to give a brilliant and concise summary of the various arguments which had been the subject of such fierce controversy at the time. The class listened politely and attentively, but they listened as their 20th Century counterparts might have listened to an account of the doctrinal squabbles between Calvinists and Catholics during the Reformation. It was all so remote and unreal; in truth, barely comprehensible. They could not feel it.

After he had concluded his disquisition Sukano asked the class whether they had any particular point they wished to raise. No one had. The Doctor nodded. "Before we take our final leave of the *Report,*" he said, "there is one question I would like to put to you. At what point do you suppose that Mahler gained acceptance of us?"

They all knew what the question

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meant and they all knew the answer.

"Yes, Amanda?"

"Well, when he drank from the canal, sir."

Sukano nodded and smiled. "Precisely. Mahler's symbolic conquest of his own fear of death. Everything stemmed from that. Which brings us rather neatly to your next week's assignment: Walter Hagendorf's *Being and Non-Being*. I think you will all enjoy it."

The waterclock emitted a single, plangent chime.

Sukano glanced up. Then, reaching behind him, he drew out from a recess a little, carved, wooden box. He consulted the inscribed label which was attached to it by a silver thread. "Frauke Andersen," he read out.

Frauke rose from her cushion, stepped forward, knelt, steepled her fingertips before her lips and gravely bowed her small, blonde head.

Sukano handed her the box and bowed in his turn. "Happy anniversary, Frauke," he said.

As was the custom the girl untied the thread, opened the box and lifted out the miniature chalcedony *aryballus*. She gazed at it for a moment, then held it up for all the class to see. "Happy birthday, Frauke," they chorused. "Happy birthday."

Then, with Frauke solemnly leading the way, the children filed out, leaving Doctor Sukano alone with his thoughts and his own *aryballus* of cherry blossom.

(*from page 38*)

On the other hand, being disliked by him strikes me as infinitely worse. He seems to be a person who understands revenge. I'm not sure I'd wish his ire even on Mr. Casparole, although it is true that he canceled the movie deal after I'd invested two months' work in it, and, so far, my agent hasn't been able to extract the payment promised....

Hmm! I've changed my mind. I shall call on Mr. Secrett as soon as possible.

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Kenneth Bulmer was born in London in 1921 and has been writing sf since the early 1950's. Long time readers will recall his superior story "The Adjusted," (F&SF, June 1966). His many novels include Roller Coaster World, City Under the Sea *and* The Doomsday Men.

Psycho Sis

by KENNETH BULMER

1.

The greasy blood clotting in her hair and glistening in streaks down her body mocked her nightdress's frill of lace. The murder had been clumsy. Blood-stained lilac nylon tangled around her hips and legs. She sprawled half off the bed and her mouth still rounded in its last scream.

Switch off.

ABLE

"But that's just not possible." Kingson half rose from the institutionally upholstered chair. Lights flared. "That's not true! No — that's not it at all!" He knew better than that. Much better.

Warren, that shadowy public man with the manner of a mortician at a wedding, soothed with professional brevity. "We just want you to watch, Mr. Kingson. That's all."

"But I feel responsible for Trudy —"

"I know you do. That's why we've asked you here."

"But —"

"Just watch, Mr. Kingson. *Please.*"

2.

His office. Well, that was clear enough. By the slant of sunshine through the single window he could tell the time was around sixteen hundred. And, there, that coffee stain on the wall where Mr. Andrides, a nervous client, had hurled his cup, yes, that meant this must be before August when he'd at last had the spot papered over.

Trudy was sitting in the client's chair facing him at his desk. He kept a Spartan office, part of the clarity of his mind, he liked to think. He'd indulged himself buying the desk, though, a massive piece with ornate century-before-last bulbous legs and a leather-cloth working surface stamped in gold fleurs-de-lis; — solid, reassuring, a symbol and a talisman.

Already Mrs. Trudy Salmon's face betrayed strains he must not let inter-

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fere with his work. Her story, unique and horrifying to her, was familiar and routine to him. She sat there, compact, indrawn on herself, her coat pulled about her, her hands together and fast in her lap. She leaned slightly forward, away from the support of the chair back.

"So you see, Mr. Kingson, I just can't go on. I can't go on any more like this. Harry — Harry won't help. I just can't understand how — how we drifted into this."

"You're not alone any more, Mrs. Salmon. You have come to me for help and you have come in time. Your husband —"

"Harry didn't want me to come. He doesn't see any problems. That's what's so ghastly."

"Understandable. He doesn't want people to know. So he refused you permission to come and see me. This is a clear indication that he does feel guilt. Suppressed guilt causes erratic behavior. His desire for — ah — Barbara Mason to live in with you and the children —"

"Barbara. *She's done this before*, you know. She leeches onto a married man because she can't face up to a marriage of her own."

"I see."

"Eighteen months ago. A friend at the office. Just like Harry."

"I notice you retain the title of Mrs. You speak of marriage in a way that indicates you have thought about —"

"Thought about it! It's a marriage, that's all. If Harry thinks I'm going to have that leech living in my house with her negligees and scents and furs, and me doing the dishes and cooking and cleaning — Harry . . ." Her hands half lifted to her face and then dropped back to her lap. The contours and planes of her face shifted. Her lips, on which the lipstick looked like flaked paint over rust, moved helplessly, then compressed. She could not, he understood, bring herself to any adequate vocalization of her thoughts.

"You told me your husband accused you of failing to control the children. He invited you to leave home. When you refused, he wished to install his mistress in your house. I believe we have grounds —"

"I don't want grounds! I still love Harry — I think. I don't want to throw away my life. Can I start over? At my age?"

"You're still a young woman, Mrs. Salmon."

"What's that got to do with it? My life is Harry and the children. I can't face sharing them with another woman."

Cut.

—

BRAVO

"You agree to all that, Mr. Kingson?"

Warren spoke gently. His bland yet concerned face turned only occasionally to look at the man in the upholstered chair.

"I suppose so. I'm a little vague. That was in June, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"I'm good at my job. Trudy looked at her problem squarely. There was no danger of her psychiatric health deteriorating."

"You perceived no special dangers in the situation?"

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Kingson resented the implications of the question. "No special dangers. After two sessions with me she was able to see her problems. That's half the battle."

"Battle," said Warren. "I see."

Now watch this

3.

A downtown street compressed by blocky masses of buildings stark against the sky. There were still too many people, of course, jostling on the sidewalks, crossing at the lights, hustling along the pedways, passing and repassing in public transport and a few official cars. Trudy Salmon's children, the three of them, chased out ahead, diving between pedestrians, shouting and laughing, disciplined enough, he considered, for three-, four- and five-year-olds, given the circumstances.

He recognized the building standing aloof in its circle of greenery. He recognized it now with a sneer he accepted as a perfectly genuine reaction.

Trudy Salmon called to her children at the crossing lights as they waited for the traffic flow to pause. They could have taken the underpass as the pedestrians could have used the tunnel pedways with their fading plastic and scratched dural, for here the city had not yet been fully integrated in traffic-pedestrian patterns. The dozers and the ready-erects would soon be here, though, transforming the old end-of-century city into a googologically synthesized city. As it was, the wait gave him time to look again at the building half-sheltered by summer trees.

"I do hope I'm doing the right thing, Mr. Kingson." Trudy Salmon looked at the building as she spoke, not at Kingson. "Grace didn't think I should; that's why I came to you."

"Times are changing faster than ever these days."

"You can't miss that. But with the city vanishing and the synthesized city being built — they put this up in such a strange spot."

"The new city will soon overtake this area. Then it will all fit in."

Lights dripped red and they crossed. The children, anxious to meet the future head-on, raced whooping into the building. Trudy tilted her head. She spelled out the words up there stamped in permanent plastic over the architrave:

SOCIAL INTEGRATION SERVICE

"That's it," said Kingson. "Psycho Sis. Big Brother's Big Sister. She'll have you right in a jiffy."

Cut

CHARLIE

"But this is insane!" Kingson didn't believe all this flapperticlap. He said so. Loudly. "Flapperticlap!" he said. "I wouldn't go near Psycho Sis if you bribed me with a penthouse suite!"

"Just so, Mr. Kingson."

The new voice purred genially. He did not know who the woman was who joined Warren in the viewroom. Large and soft and saggy in a twin-set, she bulked like a primeval Earth-mother herself, her placid knowing face all satiny rounds and shining surfaces. She was the one to open the honey jar.

Warren, still without looking at Kingson, said, "We've only just begun,

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Mrs. Hardman. "As you can see — it's still Psycho Sis."

"What did happen?"

Now see this

4.

A small green area — a municipal park — with different flower beds and arrogant gravel paths. Two streets away, the city was being torn down and the new synthesized city built over the ruins. Children played energetically in the crumbled rim of ruins. In the park a man and a woman argued, exhaustedly.

"You're so damned unreasonable, Trudy."

"*I* am! You're the one who wants to break us up and drag another woman in —"

"I've explained all that —"

"I'd never believe you could do this to me, Harry. Not after I've given you the best years of my life."

"So you want a receipt?"

Kingson's noisy approach on the gravel scarcely disturbed them, close-locked in their symbiosis of jaundice and intolerance of mutual resentments at mutual intolerance.

"Now, then, Mr. Salmon," said Kingson in his professional soother's voice. "I'm sure —"

"Go to hell, Kingson! What are you? A head shrinker, a trick cyclist, a psyche-manip, a one-man mind-voyeur!"

Harry Salmon strode away along the loud paths. He half turned, black and blocky against the sunlight. "Trudy — go to SIS."

"Don't worry, Mrs. Salmon. I can assure you I won't let Psycho Sis get her unfeeling paws on you." Kingson could feel the righteous anger in himself, and he welcomed that luxurious feeling. The impertinence personified of a Harry Salmon was a mere perfunctory obstacle to him in his profession.

"I believe in you, Mr. Kingson. I do."

"I appreciate your trust, Mrs. Salmon." At their first meeting he had addressed her as Ms. Salmon. She had made a face, her lips down-curved, half lifting a hand, and said, "I'm married to Harry and I'm Mrs. Salmon. Anything less would have been a holding back." He'd nodded with professional incisiveness. "They used to bother over alienation, and the Ms. syndrome contributed to that."

Now in the soft upholding warmth of the summer park she turned back as Harry Salmon vanished. "Would SIS help me?"

"All Psycho Sis consists of is a giant-sized computer with delusions of humanity. Her obsessed slaves take all your answers to their prying questions and feed them in on their programs. And you know how reliable a computer program is!"

"I've heard."

"Yes, and then they work their infernal electronic calculus. All they come up with are inhuman answers. They can't handle human problems like a human. A robot never could and never will. It's sheer common sense."

A corroded wall collapsed in the next street but one, and dust spouted to rise and hang like djinni from ancient bottles. The noise reverberated. The maws of electronically guided bulldozers crunched down. The sun shone.

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"They're changing the face of the world, Mrs. Salmon, now they've managed to contain the breeding problem. It only needed those orientals and those purblind religious sects here to see the problem whole. But their automatic-everything paradise needs a man like me to wipe its backside."

Trudy Salmon hesitated. "Children," she said. "Harry didn't half carry on when the last one came. The population people made trouble. Well, of course, they would."

"One thing they'll never get down on magnetic tape," said Kingson. "The human problem of the human condition."

"I sometimes think Harry's been infected with all this twenty-first century science and multilevel thinking. He can't see limits. What's the word they use?"

"Googologics."

"Googologics, yes. Infected by it all, diseased. One wife isn't good enough for him any more."

"I'll save your marriage."

"Marriage?" Mrs. Salmon reacted. "Who the hell's talking about marriage now? It's my home, my kids and my man — they're what I'm fighting for."

"I see. Marriage has rather gone out of fashion, true, with these group-linkages sanctioned by law. But, in a true twinning liaison, domestic situations like yours will still exist even without marriage. I haven't forgotten you call yourself Mrs. and not Ms. In a marriage or twinned-liaison situation you will react hostilely to a *menage a trois* potential. Some people do not fit into the group situation. Modern innovations, so-called, generally resurrect a past phase of existence. I can give you good arguments to prove that."

"This Psycho Sis. She can foretell the future, I hear."

Kingson laughed in the sunshine with the old city falling down two streets away and the new synthesized city rising above the crushed rubble. "That's what they claim. But individual practitioners like myself can better judge what will happen than all the machinery in the world. We have decades of experience behind us."

Cut

DOG

Kingson wiped sweat away from his forehead. Warren leaned over him.

"In your old-fashioned terms, Mr. Kingson, Mrs. Salmon was going through an identity crisis. You didn't react to this?"

"Of course I did! She was entitled to her life and to all the expertise I could give her. I gave good advice."

"Advice, Mr. Kingson. Yes. We deal in opinions backed by prognostication."

"Yes. You feast off the psyche."

The large woman moved lumpily within the twin-set, creasing the fawn wool, and put her hand to her mouth covering an ulcerous laugh.

"Like this?"

Take notice — prog percentage ninety-seven point three

5.

A stairway in an apartment block scheduled for demolition. Carpets frayed, paint chipped and wood splintered. Graffiti curlicued from

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aerosol paintcans. A closed door, the key plate scuffed brass. The name plate broken in half.

Harry Salmon, a teddy-bear man with knotted muscles convulsing beneath his short-sleeved orange shirt, his face congested, his jacket slung to the floor, hammering on the door. His fists beat like Chicago rivets. At his side, Barbara Mason, cheaply svelte in white sweater and scarlet pants and high-heeled shoes, a scarlet chiffon scarf knotted about her throat, half cringes back, half laughs, at Harry's violent anger. She differs from Trudy Salmon only in age, but seven years and three children set a destroying gulf between them.

"Open this door, Trudy. Open up or I'll break it down!"

Muffled, a voice through the door. "This is my home, Harry. You're not bringing your whore in here!"

Barbara Mason squeals. Her color is high. She does not consciously realize how much she is enjoying this. "Harry! You can't let her say things like that about me!"

Mr. Salmon kicks the door. He draws back, hunches up those teddy-bear shoulders, puts his head down, charges. The door shakes. Mr. Salmon bounces. Mr. Salmon swears. Three times he flings himself at the door. Three times he bounces. On the last assault the hinges and lock give, squealing and tearing, the door crashes in.

Shouts, blows, screams, the distant voice of neighborly enquiry, more shouting and the crashing crunch of shattering furniture, eventually the sirens. . . .

Erase

EASY

"No, no, no!" shouted Kingson. "That's not it at all!"

"She was following your advice."

"But that didn't happen." Kingson groped. "Did it?"

Warren smiled his gentle smile. "Ah!" he said, pleased.

The room's air conditioning cycled into higher gear. The computer display-outlet glimmered with stray traces. A dim and confused murmur of voices and passing footsteps seeped in past the screened-glass partition from the corridor.

"I believe you are gaining a glimmering of what we do here. Multivalue logic proved a hard nut to you solo psychological practitioners." Warren pressed a button on his console, and the viewscreen began to gather speed. "Some of you accepted the work of Pavlov and Skinner, Eyzenck and Grierson too literally. Behaviorism is a way in, not an end in itself. We all want to know what will happen, how to diagnose, how to prognosticate. A gene-dominated thinking context can hinder as well as help; environmental data can confuse as well as explain."

"I used time-tested techniques with Mrs. Salmon — Trudy." Kingson's confusion as to his presence here began to itch him like the beginnings of a sore throat. Come to that, he was not exactly sure where he was... "Googologics, your great scientific tool to open Pandora's box, can answer none of the human problems."

"Psychiatry was clearly failing even

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before the end of the twentieth century."

"Psychiatry is no longer a juvenile branch of medicine."

"I agree. Junior, yes. Juvenile, no. But here at Social Integration it has been incorporated as one more tool. An important tool, but one among many in the multidimensional science we handle at Social Integration Service."

"Social Integration! You mean I'm in Psycho Sis?"

Warren would not be diverted. Anyway, it was obvious. "How crude it surely is for one man to probe and pry into another person's mind."

Kingson had to answer that. "Group therapy has—"

"You compound the crime if you place that kind of knowledge and power and responsibility into more hands."

The large woman bosomed into the room as though she had been listening outside. Electrical devices would stud this room as they studded all the rooms — *here.*

"I think, Mr. Warren, we are scarcely that far ahead yet."

Warren put his hands into the pockets of his white coat. Then he tilted his head and smiled. "Yes, Mrs. Hardman, you are right. I was — participating — myself, then."

"Let Mr. Kingson judge this ninety-nine point nine nine percent prog. Judge what is not said, please, Mr. Kingson, of course . . ."

Now watch this

6.

Mrs. Trudy Salmon and Grace, an old friend her own age, in private, talking.

"I blame myself. Harry had a terrible childhood, losing his parents like that. I've failed him. I can't face seeing anyone. Harry's right. He doesn't want anyone to know."

"That's because he's guilty." Grace, incensed, concerned, old school chums and with her own problems, deeply worried over Trudy and with no time for Harry.

"I'm the guilty one, Grace. Nothing can alter that. I'm not going to Psycho Sis or any social worker."

"But, Trudy, a marriage-guidance counselor."

"It's no good. I can't stand the thought of being merely a number on a file, a case to be dealt with according to a set of rules. You know how busy those people are, no real time to give the people they see. People don't all react the same. They'd try to make me do things out of what they read in the book I ought to do."

Later

7.

"How can Harry expect us to carry on as though everything is normal? For the kids' sakes? Barbara's gone off to Rio. They're corresponding like those two did on the box last night, Abelard and Heloise, with a satellite-routed teletype. I do the dishes and make the beds and get the kids off to school. He spends all his time and money at the teletype outlet. It's not going on much longer like this, Grace, I can tell you that."

("Do you hear the crackle of the furnace between the words, Mr. Kingson?")

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"Look, Trudy, I know it's all supposed to be a deep dark secret, but Harry's people ought to be told. His aunt, for one."

"No, Grace! I couldn't let Harry down like that."

"My God! Who's letting who down, for God's sake?"

"It's my fault we never got back to rights after little Harry was born. The population people were awful — you know. They more or less accused me of taking the food out of the mouths of other children."

Grace was partisan, defiantly so. "That wasn't your fault. Harry was a Boy Scout, wasn't he? Didn't he learn about knots?"

"Harry's Harry. Maybe that's what started all this off. And then losing my father — that air crash — when we'd rowed so badly. It wasn't the same after. I've made a mess of it all, Grace. A terrible mess."

Fade

FOX

Kingson felt the disorientation grip him as though he swung in a nongravity simulator. He licked his lips, and Mrs. Hardman passed him a plastic cup of iced water.

"I'm a little confused. The time sequence of all this is — out of kilter — that must have been near the end." He forced himself to stop and take breath. Then he started over. "I mean, I don't remember much after she had reached that point. I can't remember."

"The end, Mr. Kingson?" Warren remained polite.

"I don't recall. Trudy rang me and I went over. Grace was there. Barbara was still in Rio, and the children had been taken by Harry's aunt. Trudy sounded — I can remember taking a bus — I think it was raining . . ."

Mrs. Hardman pushed the cup of water at his lips.

"Your confusion is understandable, Mr. Kingson. Don't let it worry you. Harry was a violent man. He threatened to punch you, didn't he?"

Kingson, sipping, nodded. Water splashed.

"Y'know, Mr. Kingson," said Warren, reflectively, taking the plastic cup. "Way back when, they used all kinds of methods to help people. And to operate their systems they had to use whatever means of obtaining information they could. There was a lot of filling in of forms. A lot of questions. Psychologists and marriage-guidance counselors and prison-reform bodies and parole boards and researchers into drugs all wanted to know everything they could. But they were all separate — oh, I know they co-operated and if S.I.S. hadn't happened, no doubt one day they'd have worked out a halfway reasonable method of working together, of dovetailing effort."

"You mean, the computer wins either way?"

"Computers are only tools."

"At least, we are human beings."

"Granted. And human beings operate and control S.I.S."

"Psycho Sis is a harpy!"

Stress Statistics. Primary Subdivisions. Elements.

8.

PRIMARIES

a. Broken Home

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b. Death of
  b.1. One Parent
  b.2. Both Parents
c. Imprisonment of parent or parents
d. Insufficient care and attention
e. Battered Baby Syndrome
f. Attempted rape
g. Drunkenness
  g.1. Habitual
  g.2. Intermittent
h. . . . exponential . . .
  Cut

GEORGE

Mrs. Hardman clucked and thumped her plastic cup down so that the bottom buckled. "And that doesn't even incorporate status and wealth coefficients!" She breathed over Kingson. "Let alone education. As Mr. Warren was saying, we feed in every particle of information we can find on the problem. This applies to just one problem involving only the victims concerned. Like Mrs. Salmon. It's difficult to tabulate all her data now, of course."

Kingson sneered. Conscious of the affectation and what it probably meant, he yet felt it right to sneer. "Why? You can't pretend that first scene you showed me was real. That murder, the blood on the nightgown — horrible and beastly. Trudy hasn't been murdered by her husband!"

"No, Mr. Kingson. Her husband did not murder Mrs. Salmon."

The buckled plastic cup, unnoticed, abruptly snapped into shape with a loud crack.

Only Kingson started.

Mrs. Hardman said, "Just one problem is fed in, all the answers to those questions you dislike so much. When the problem is finished it is cleared from the memory banks. Anything we learn that is new, that will form a fresh base, that will aid us in the future, we keep totally unrelated to the problem where it originated. Everything else is flushed."

"You expect me to believe that? Psycho Sis is known to be a spy, an informer, an —"

"That is not our function. We exist to integrate humanity with society. And that's a backhanded way of saying it. But civilization takes brains and work and dedication to keep running. It is a fragile thing, too easily destroyed. Society gives its constituent parts — and they're us — strength, but it can destroy. We are in the business of enabling people to live in society. What that society is depends on itself as much as on its people. S.I.S. is not a robot and does not issue orders."

"It's just a mechanical monster."

"Overacting does not suit you, Mr. Kingson. The new synthesized city is creating problems. Society is in upheaval again, as it always is. There are lone-wolf psychiatrists still operating. There are always stresses. We can feed into S.I.S. all the facts on a problem we know, and then we can develop a prognosis. We can see what will happen with a problem if it is allowed to develop. All is glitter-snow color, up there on the screen. Like Harry breaking down Trudy's door. Like Trudy being murdered. Like you taking Trudy to see us here at S.I.S."

"I never did!"

"That's one of the tragedies, Mr. Kingson."

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Warren caught Mrs. Hardman's eye. She billowed forward and said to him: "Our time is limited on this one. But speed sometimes defeats its own purpose . . ."

"You're right, of course, Mrs. Hardman. The director was saying only the other day — but this one is getting to me."

"I'm sure Mr. Kingson will appreciate the expression of a fully adult attitude can be found in litigation and not violence."

The incipient headache fretting away at Kingson began a series of painful forays, little jabs and stabs into his brain.

Mrs. Hardman had taken over from Warren. "Current attitudes and actions reverberate down the corridors of time and affect the future we are sailing into at our notorious one second per second. We generate as many vibrations as we can and then watch the echo come bounding back from the future. A time radar."

"A time radar!" said Kingson. But his scorn's edge recoiled blunted from the images thronging his own mind.

There were not many like him left in this googologic-obsessed world. He and his confreres remained as inviolate bastions of humanity in a sea of insensate automation. He knew the stories. Population rationalization had been achieved when the unacceptable alternatives had been explored. A voluntary birth control bred for feckless inconsiderateness in the race. That had been a painful and slowly learned lesson. Pollution, still a problem, was being cleared up by planning and considerable self-sacrifice. Alternate energy sources were being tapped. War was an anachronism. The suicide rate was significantly down.

Central Computing — Inventory

9.

Subsection L: a. Pills — see supplementary coding.
b. Razor blades.
c. Rope, cord, string, electric flex — see supplementary coding.
d. Firearms — see documentation relative subsection codings...
e. Gas.
f. ...exponential...

Cut

HARRY

No No! No!!

Reset

10.

Subsection N: a. Velocity statistics:
a.1. Terminal
a.2. Impact:
i Automobiles
ii Buses, trucks
iii Trains
iv ...exponential...

Cut

ITEM

His headache buzzsawed around between his eyes and brain, separating cerebellum from cerebral cortex, near paralyzing and half blinding him. His confusion had to be sorted out. They showed him pictures that were not real — ghastly parodies — quoted the future as though they owned it. As a prac-

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titioner, as a surviving lone practitioner, he must, he must. The old doctor-heal-thyself saw sawed here, between his eyes and brain.

The suicide rate was significantly down, people's tolerance of themselves was up in this googologic world.

"You're saying you could tell what Trudy would have done? What her husband would have done? All in Psycho Sis?" He waved a drunken hand about. "Flashing up there on the screen?"

"Yes, Mr. Kingson. We are in the business of helping ordinary people by exploring what will happen on the basis of using what data we have, can acquire, can extrapolate. It's not magic. But some recalcitrants fear us, as their ancestors feared the steam engine, the power loom and the printing press."

"Not without reason, as history shows."

"We are here to help."

"You think I'll turn over my client to you? You know what you can do."

"That is outside—" began Warren.

Kingson chopped him off. His headache now removed his awareness so that he heard himself speaking and tried to fight down the deadly tinny rhetoric from a stultifying distance. "This is the end of the little man, the ordinary man. This is Mechanistria rampant. All your computers and multivalue logic techniques give you pseudo powers you flaunt in the face of an ignorant public. So you can take over, reduce everything to a grey mush, debase humanity, destroy individuality. You're automated mind-leeches!"

Now see this

11.

Trudy: I can't go on any more, Grace. I don't think Barbara ever would come here to look after the children if I gave in and left.

Grace: You can't do that, Trudy! It's unthinkable.

Trudy: What can I do, Grace? What can I do? I need help....

Grace: You must see someone. Bill will know. Someone nice and sympathetic and who is trained....

Trudy: You mean a psychiatrist! Well, go on, say it!

Grace: Someone who can help. Harry needn't know.

Trudy: Find someone, Grace. Someone to help me.

Slow fade

JOKER

An inconspicuous communications screen lit up with the face of the director, concerned, involved, desperately busy.

"Problems, Mr. Warren?"

"Nothing we can't handle, Director. Just that it's taking us a little longer than we programmed."

"Mr. Wagner is waiting for you to clear the outlet. He has a case of some complexity awaiting program confirmation."

Mrs. Hardman spoke with the gentle accents normal here. "Drop the baffle, please, Mr. Warren." The communications screen and Warren and Mrs. Hardman became enveloped in a fog that hid them from Kingson, who ignored them and the baffle. He sat forward in his comfortable upholstered chair, biting his fingernails, trying to remember... Trudy Salmon. A case, a client. What of Trudy Salmon?

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On the communications screen within the shielding fog, the director checked the chronometer.

"Can you be all through in half an hour?"

Mrs. Hardman sighed and her fawn twin-set crumpled and creased. "We will try, Director. The case involves a recalcitrant, a lone-wolf practitioner. Talks still of Psycho Sis."

"Oh?" The director digested that. He programmed his own chart and thumbnailed down the case list for the day. "A husband and wife estrangement, three children, the other woman, hmm? What's the problem?"

"She — that is the offended wife — shared much of the recalcitrant's attitudes. She consulted him instead of coming to us. That reveals identification problems. They don't make it easy for us."

The director looked as though he was preparing to become annoyed. "I am well aware that the service still has an uphill struggle, particularly among some areas. That's one reason why we're where we are." The director tapped his case list provided by Central Computing. "But the synthesized city is being built to schedule and will reach us soon. After that, we can program our major work. Society is a phenomenon not to be trifled with, by estranged wives or anyone else. You have explained all this in his psychiatric terms?"

"Yes, Director," said Warren. "But the case is —"

"The wife can be straightened out if the recalcitrant psychiatrist you have in there co-operates. You score by having him in at this stage. Their day is done. Everyone knows that — except them."

"Your case list," said Mrs. Hardman. "It indicates the classic triangle?"

"Of course?"

"But —" said Warren. A new quality in the concern in his face and voice alerted the director at once.

He said, "The psychiatrist you have in there will co-operate? I do not understand you — the case list indicates a degree of animosity, as you report, and

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as is to be expected. But his presence guarantees our procedures will operate. No doubt he has been talking about human values as though he alone possessed them."

"A great deal. He has become guilt-obsessed over Trudy Salmon. He thought he understood her needs. He tried to help her, for he knew, as we know, that pain and guilt are everyday problems of human life."

"Yes." The director's puzzlement was effectively muted. "These are not empty pompous phrases, parroted by rote, he ought to see that. He is a trained psychiatrist, like us all, in his own lonely fashion. His own human understandings will give him the right decision once the full situation is laid out for him. Human love and understanding have always managed in the past in these cases, handled by googologic techniques. So?"

"Your case list," said Mrs. Hardman in a choked voice.

"Perfectly straightforward. Wronged wife, estranged husband, other woman. Mr. Wagner is waiting. What's holding you up?"

Speaking slowly and firmly, Warren said, "Mr. Kingson has foundered under his guilt because of the unwitting pain he has caused. He has suffered a massive trauma. Amnesiac. He couldn't compensate for or handle his guilt. You see —"

"But," said the director. "You're telling me.... The wronged wife, this Mrs. Trudy Salmon... The case is here before me programmed direct from Central Computing. Now you — Please —"

"You see," said Warren, wishing he could see Kingson and touch him through the shielding fog. "You see, Director, Trudy Salmon killed herself. She suicided. Despite what your information from the computer says, we're working with Psycho Sis on bringing back the memory and restoring the sanity of Mr. Kingson."

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THE FLOATING CRYSTAL PALACE

Last month (as I write this) my wife Janet and I crossed the Atlantic on the *Queen Elizabeth 2;* then, after one day in Southampton, we crossed right back.

We did this for a number of reasons. I gave a pair of talks each way, Janet is crazy about ships, and both of us find ourselves in an island of peace away from the cares of the workaday world. (Actually, I managed to write a small book while on board, but that's another story.)

In one respect, though, I was disenchanted on this particular voyage. It had always been my dim assumption that there was one word that is absolutely taboo on any liner. You might say something was very large, huge, monstrous, gigantic, but you would never say something was — well, the adjective begins with a T.

I was wrong. One evening on the ship, a stand-up comedian said, "I hope you'll all be joining us at the big banquet tomorrow, folks. We're celebrating the anniversary of the Titanic."

I was shocked! Heaven knows I've never been accused of good taste in my off-hand humor, but this, I thought, was going too far. Had I known he was going to say it, I might well have tried to round up a committee for the feeding of poor, deserving sharks by throwing the comedian overboard.

Did others feel the same way?

No, sir! The remark was greeted with general laughter, with myself (as far as I could tell) the only abstainer.

Why did they laugh? I thought

ISAAC ASIMOV

Science

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about it, and an essay began to build itself in my mind. Here it is —

Let's start with St. Brendan, an Irish monk of the 6th Century.

At that time, Ireland could fairly lay claim to being the cultural leader of the western world. The west-European provinces of the Roman Empire lay sunk and broken in gathering darkness, but the light of learning burned in Ireland (which had never been part of the Empire), and the knowledge of Greek was retained here, though nowhere else in the west. Until the Irish light was extinguished by the Viking invasions of the 9th Century and the English incursions thereafter, there was a three-century golden age on the island.

Part of the golden age was a set of remarkable Irish explorations that reached to Iceland and perhaps even beyond. (An Irish colony may have existed on Iceland for a century, but was gone by the time the Vikings landed in the 9th Century.) One explorer we know by name was St. Brendan.

About 550, St. Brendan sailed northward and seems to have explored the islands off the Scottish coast — the Hebrides, the Orkneys, the Shetlands. It is possible that he went still farther north, reaching the Faeroe Islands, about 750 kilometers (470 miles) north of the northern tip of Ireland. This was almost surely the record northward penetration by sea of any human being up to that time.

St. Brendan's voyage was remarkable enough for its time, but in later years tradition magnified it. In 800, a fictional account of his voyages was published and proved very popular. It was, in a way, a primitive example of science fiction, in that the writer drew liberally on his imagination, but made careful use of traveller's tales as the supporting framework (just as modern science fiction writers would use scientific theory for the purpose).

In the tale, for instance, St. Brendan is described as having sighted a "floating crystal palace."

Is there anything in polar exploration that could give rise to this particular fantasy?

Certainly. An iceberg. Assuming this interpretation to be correct, this is the first mention of an iceberg in world literature.

In later centuries, when the north polar ocean was systematically explored, icebergs came to be a common sight. Where did they come from?

To be sure, the sea tends to freeze near the poles, and the Arctic ocean is covered with a more or less unbroken layer of ice in the winter months. This sea-ice is not very thick, however. The average thickness is 1.5 meters (5 feet), and some parts may reach a thickness of as much as 4 meters (13 feet).

We can imagine pieces of that sea-ice breaking off as the weather warms in the spring and then floating southward, but those pieces would scarcely be impressive. They would be flat slabs of ice, topping sea-level by some 40 centimeters (15 inches) or less.

Compare this to an Arctic iceberg, the top of which can tower 30 meters (100 feet) above sea-level. One iceberg was reported to have reached a record height of

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170 meters (560 feet) above sea level — almost half as tall as the Empire State Building. Counting the portion that was submerged, that piece of ice may have been 1.6 kilometers (1 mile) from top to bottom.

Such a huge chunk of ice could have been spawned only on land.

At sea, the liquid water below the ice layer acts as a heat sink which, even in the coldest polar winter, keeps the ice from growing too thick. On land, the solid surface, with less heat capacity than water has, and with no currents to bring warmer material from elsewhere, drops to low sub-freezing temperature and exerts no melting effect. The snow simply piles up from year to year and is capable of forming great thicknesses of ice.

Long-lived ice forms and thickens on mountain heights all over the world. It also forms at sea-level in polar regions. The largest piece of land in the Arctic which is wholly polar is Greenland, and it is on that vast island that the ice is most extensive and thickest.

The Greenland ice sheet fills the interior of the island and is about 2500 kilometers (1500 miles) long, north and south, and up to 1100 kilometers (700 miles) wide, east and west.

The area of the Greenland ice sheet is just over 1,800,000 square kilometers (700,000 square miles); a single piece of ice, in other words, that is more than three times the area of Texas. At its thickest point, the Greenland ice sheet is about 3.3 kilometers (2 miles) thick. Along most of the Greenland coast, however, is a fringe of bare land that, in places, is up to 300 kilometers (190 miles) wide.

(It is on the southwestern fringe of bare land that Viking colonists stubbornly clung for four centuries from 980 to 1380.)

Each year more snow falls on the Greenland ice-sheet, and hardly any of it melts in the warmer months (and what does tends to refreeze the next winter), yet the ice-sheet does not get endlessly thicker. Ice, you see, is plastic under pressure.

As the ice-sheet thickens, its own weight tends to flatten it and spread it out. The ice, driven by enormous pressure, is forced, in the form of glaciers, to move, like solid creeping rivers along the valleys and into the seas. These glaciers move at rates of up to 45 meters (150 feet) per day, which is enormous when compared to the rate at which ordinary mountain glaciers (driven by far smaller pressures) move.

When the Greenland glaciers reach the sea, the ice does not melt appreciably. Neither the Greenland sun, nor the cold seas surrounding Greenland will deliver enough heat to do much to them. The tips of the glaciers simply break off ("calve"), and huge lumps of ice plop into the sea. It is these that are the icebergs. ("Berg," by the way, is German for "mountain.")

In Arctic waters, some 16,000 icebergs are calved each year. About 90 percent of them originate from Greenland glaciers that enter the sea in Baffin Bay, which bathes the western shore of the island.

The largest glacier in the world, the Humboldt Glacier, lies in northwestern Greenland at 80°N. It is 80 kilometers (50 miles) across its coastal foot, but it is too

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cold to break off icebergs at a record rate. Farther south, about two-thirds of the length down the western coast of Greenland, the Jacobshavn Glacier calves 1400 icebergs a year.

Since ice has a density of 0.9, most of the iceberg is below the surface. The exact quantity submerged depends on how pure the ice is. The ice usually contains a great many air bubbles which give it a milky appearance, rather than the transparency of true ice, and this lowers its density. On the other hand, in approaching the sea, the glaciers may well scrape up gravel and rock which may remain with the iceberg and which would increase its overall density. On the whole, anything from 80 to 90 percent of the iceberg is submerged.

As long as icebergs remain in Arctic waters, they persist without much change. The freezing water of the Arctic Ocean will not melt them appreciably. The icebergs that form off the western coast of Greenland linger in Baffin Bay for a long time, but eventually begin to move southward through Davis Strait into the waters south of Greenland and east of Labrador.

Many icebergs are trapped along the bleak coast of Labrador, and there they break up and slowly melt, but some persist, largely intact, as far south as Newfoundland, taking up to three years to make the 3000-kilometer (1800-mile) journey.

Once an iceberg reaches Newfoundland, however, its fate is sealed. It drifts past that island into the warm waters of the Gulf Stream.

In an average year some 400 icebergs pass Newfoundland and move into the shipping lanes of the North Atlantic. Most of them melt in two weeks in the warm embrace of the Gulf Stream, but the remnants of one giant were sighted on June 2, 1934 at the record southerly latitude of 30°N., the latitude of northern Florida.

At the start of the last stage of its journey, however, an iceberg is still massive and menacing and is even more dangerous than it looks, since the major portion of each iceberg is submerged and may jut outward considerably closer to some approaching vessel than the visible upper portion does.

In the years before radio, when ships were truly isolated and there was no way of knowing what lay beyond the horizon, icebergs were dangerous indeed. Between 1870 and 1890, for instance, fourteen ships were sunk and forty damaged by collision with icebergs.

Then came the "Titanic." The "Titanic" was, when it was launched in 1912, the largest ship in the world. It was 270 meters (883 feet) long and had a gross tonnage of 42,000 metric tons. Its hull was divided into sixteen watertight compartments and four of them could be ripped open without sinking the ship. In fact, the ship was considered unsinkable and was proclaimed as such. In April, 1912, it set off on its maiden voyage from Southampton to New York, carrying a glittering load of the rich and the socially prominent.

On the night of April 14-15, it sighted an iceberg at a point some 500 kilometers (300 miles) southeast of Newfoundland. The ship had been ignoring the possi-

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bility of icebergs and was going far too fast in its eagerness to set a world record for time of crossing. Consequently, by the time the iceberg was sighted, it was too late to avoid a collision.

The collision, when it came, opened a 90-meter (300-foot) gash on the ship's starboard side. A fatal five compartments were sliced open, and even so the "Titanic" held out gamely. It took nearly three hours for it to sink.

This might have been enough to save the passengers, but there had been no life-boat drills and, even if there had been, the life-boats available had room for less than half the 2,200 people aboard.

By now, radio was in use, and the "Titanic" sent out a distress signal. Another ship, the "Californian," was equipped to receive the signal and was close enough to speed to the rescue, but it had only one radio operator and a man has to sleep sometime. There was no one on duty when the signal came in.

Over 1500 lives were lost. Because of the drama of that sinking, the number of lives lost and the social position of many of the dead, the disaster revolutionized the rules governing sea travel. After the tragedy, all passenger ships were required to carry life-boats with enough seats for everyone on board, life-boat drills were to take place on every passage, radio receivers were on 24-hour alert, with men taking shifts at the earphones, and so on.

In addition, in 1914, an International Ice Patrol was established, and has been maintained ever since, to keep watch over the positions of these inanimate giants of the deep. It is supported by nineteen nations and is operated by the United States Coast Guard. The Patrol supplies continuing information on all icebergs sighted below 52°N, with a prediction of the movements of each over the next twelve hours.

Eventually, air surveillance and radar were added to the Patrol, and in the years since it has been established not one ship has been sunk by an iceberg within the area under guard. Indeed, modern liners stay so far away from icebergs that passengers never even see them on the horizon. It's no wonder, then, that the passengers on the "Queen Elizabeth 2" could afford to laugh at a tasteless reference to the "Titanic."

The glaciers of western Greenland are the most dangerous iceberg-formers in the world, but not the largest. They can't very well be the largest since the Greenland ice-sheet, while the second largest in the world, is a very poor second.

The largest ice-sheet is that of Antarctica. The Antarctica ice-sheet is a roughly circular mass of ice with a diameter of about 4500 kilometers (2800 miles) and a shoreline of over 20,000 kilometers (12,500 miles). It has an area of about 14,000,000 square kilometers (5,500,000 square miles) and is about 7½ times the Greenland ice-sheet in area — and is 1½ times the area of the United States. The average thickness of the Antarctica ice-sheet is just about 2 kilometers (1¼ miles) and at its thickest it is 4.3 kilometers (2⅔ miles).

The total volume of the Antarctica ice-sheet is about 30,000,000 cubic kilo-

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meters (7,000,000 cubic miles), and this is 90 percent of all the ice in the world.

There are two deep indentations into the roughly circular continent, and these are Ross Sea and Weddell Sea. As the Antarctica ice-sheet is flattened out and spreads outward, it reaches these seas first, but it doesn't calve there as the Greenland ice-sheet does in the west. The Antarctica ice-sheet is too thick, and, instead, it moves out intact over the seas to form two ice-shelves.

The ice-shelves remain intact for a distance of up to 1300 kilometers (800 miles) out to sea, and form slabs of ice that are some 800 meters (half a mile) thick where they leave land and are still 250 meters (a sixth of a mile) thick at their seaward edge. The Ross Ice Shelf, the larger of the two, has an area equal to that of France.

The ice-shelves do not push northward indefinitely, of course. Eventually, slabs of ice break off the sea-ward edge, to form huge "tabular icebergs," flat on top, up to 100 meters (330 feet) above sea-level, and with lengths that can be measured in hundred of kilometers.

In 1956, a tabular iceberg was sighted that was 330 kilometers (200 miles) long and 100 kilometers (60 miles) wide — a single piece of free floating ice with an area half again that of the state of Massachusetts.

For the most part, Antarctic icebergs drift in the Antarctic Ocean and are carried round and round Antarctica, edging northward and slowly melting. Although representing a much larger mass of ice in total than the 400 icebergs that slip past Newfoundland each year, the Antarctic icebergs scarcely impinge upon the consciousness of mankind, since they are well off the chief trade routes of the world. Nowhere in the southern hemisphere are there shipping lanes as crowded as those of the north Atlantic.

An occasional Antarctic iceberg drifts well northward, and in 1894, the last remnant of one was sighted in the western Atlantic at 26°S., not far south of the latitude of Rio de Janeiro.

Icebergs are not all bad. The vast Antarctica ice-sheet and the huge icebergs it spawns serve as an air-conditioner for the world and, by keeping the ocean depths cold, allow sea-life to flourish.

Anything else? Well, let's start at another point.

The average American, drinking eight glasses of water a day, will consume 0.7 cubic meters (180 gallons) in a year. There is also water required for bathing, washing the dishes, watering the lawn and so on, so the average American consumes, at home, 200 cubic meters (53,000 gallons) of water per year.

But Americans also need water for domestic animals, for growing crops, and for industry. To make a kilogram of steel requires 200 kilograms of water, for instance, and to grow a kilogram of wheat requires 8000 kilograms of water.

All told, the water use of the United States comes to 2,700 cubic meters (710,000 gallons) per year per person.

In those regions of the world where industry is negligible, and where agricultural methods are simple, water needs can be satisfied by 900 cubic meters

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(240,000 gallons) per person per year. The average figure for the world as a whole might come to 1,500 cubic meters (400,000 gallons) per person per year.

How does this compare with the water supply of the world?

If all the water in the world were divided equally among the four billion people on Earth right now, it would amount to 320,000,000 cubic meters (85 billion gallons) for each person. That sounds like plenty. This is enough water, if efficiently recycled, to supply the needs of 210,000 times the present world population.

But wait! Fully 97.4 percent of all the water on Earth is the salt water of the ocean, and human beings don't use salt water, either for drinking, washing, agriculture, or industry. That 1500 cubic meters per person per year refers to fresh water only.

If all the *fresh* water on Earth were divided equally among the four billion people on Earth right now, it would amount to 8,300,000 cubic meters (2.2 billion gallons) for each person. Still not terrible. With efficient recycling, the fresh water supply could support 5500 times the present world population.

But wait! Fully 98 percent of all the fresh water on Earth is locked up in the form of ice (mostly in the Antarctica ice-sheet) and it isn't available for use by human beings. The only water that human beings can use is *liquid* fresh water, found in rivers, ponds, lakes, and ground water, and replenished continually by rain and melting snow.

If all the *liquid* fresh water were divided equally among the four billion people on Earth right now, it would amount to 160,000 cubic meters (42 million gallons) per person per year. That's still not fatal. With efficient recycling, that is enough to support 100 times the present population on Earth.

But wait! The recycling isn't one hundred percent efficient. We can't very well use more liquid fresh water per year than is supplied each year by rain or by that portion of the snowfall that eventually melts. If all the *precipitated* liquid fresh water is divided among the four billion people on Earth right now, each would get 30,000 cubic meters (8 million gallons) each year. That is enough to support 20 times the present population on Earth.

But wait! The liquid fresh water on Earth is *not* evenly spread among the world's population. Nor does the rain fall evenly, either in space or in time. The result is that some areas of the world have too much water while other areas of the world have too little. There are rain forests and there are deserts; there are times when there are disastrous floods and other times when there are disastrous droughts.

Furthermore, most of the fresh water on Earth makes its way back to the sea without the reasonable chance of being used by human beings at all, and much of the fresh water that we could use is being polluted — more all the time. The result is that, amazing to say on this water-logged planet of ours, we are heading rapidly into a disastrous world-wide water shortage.

Well, then, what do we do?

1) Obviously, we must, most of all, control population. If we multiply the

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world's population by 20 times, something we can do in 150 years if we put our minds to it, our needs will outrun the total rain supply.

2) We must do nothing to destroy the fresh water available to us. We must minimize pollution and we must avoid destroying the soil by unwise agricultural practices that lower its ability to store water, thus promoting the spread of deserts.

3) We must minimize waste and must make use of our fresh water supply more efficiently. For instance, the Amazon river, the largest in the world, discharges into the sea in one year, 7,200 cubic kilometers (1,700 cubic miles) of fresh water, enough to supply the needs of the present population of the world indefinitely — but virtually none of it is used by man. On the other hand, we can't overuse the fresh water, either. We can't tap ground water, for intance, at a rate faster than it can be replaced, for the dropping of the ground-water level, or its invasion by salt water, could be ruinous.

4) Water must be viewed as a global resource, and efforts must be made to transfer it from points of excess to points of deficit, as we routinely do for food and fuel, for instance.

So much for making do with what we have. Is there any way in which we can increase the supply? Well —

a) We can minimize the loss of fresh water by evaporation, by placing single-molecule films of certain solid alcohols, or a layer of small plastic balls, on exposed water surfaces. Such an evaporation-barrier is difficult to maintain, however, since wind and wave tend to break it up. And if it *is* maintained, it may interfere with the oxygenation of the water below.

b) Any rain that falls on the ocean is completely wasted. It might as well fall on the land. It will then, in any case, return to the ocean, but it can be used *en route.* Any method of weather control that would shift the rain from sea to land would be helpful.

c) Since the ultimate source of rain is the evaporation of sea-waer by Solar heat, we might add our human effort in that direction and get fresh water by desalinating ocean water artificially. This is not a blue-sky project but is done routinely today. Large ships get their fresh water by desalination, and energy-rich, water-poor nations such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia do so, too — and are planning expansions of such equipment in the future. This *does* take energy in large amounts, however, and, at the moment, we are ill-equipped to commit those large amounts. Is there anything else?

Well, 98 percent of the fresh water supply on Earth is in the form of ice, which need only be melted, not distilled. Melting would take much less energy than desalination does.

The major trouble is that the ice is in Greenland and Antarctica and is not very accessible.

Some of the ice, however, is floating on the ocean. Can icebergs be dragged to where water is needed without increasing the cost to prohibitive levels?

The Arctic icebergs of the North Atlantic are relatively far away from most of

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those regions on Earth which are most in need of water. They would have to be moved around Africa, for instance to reach the Middle East, and around South America to reach the American west.

But what about the huge tabular icebergs of the Antarctic? These could be moved directly northward to desiccated areas without having to dodge continental land-masses. And even a relatively small iceberg of this type would represent 100,000,000 cubic meters of fresh water, or a year's supply for 67,000 people.

Such an iceberg would have to be dragged slowly northward to the Middle East, say, right through the warm waters of the tropics. The iceberg would have to be trimmed to a ship-like form to reduce water resistance; it would have to be insulated on the sides and bottom to reduce melting; and it would have to be sliced up, each slice melted and the water stored, once it reached Middle East waters.

Can all this be done without making the expense of iceberg water greater than that of desalination water? Some experts think so, and I look forward to seeing the attempt made.

After all, how better to avenge the "Titanic" than to put icebergs to such a vital use?

(*Films, from page 58*)

To start out by praising with faint damns, the visuals were not so bad as they might have been; they were distinguished mainly by triteness (the Disney-esque dwarfs being a prime example) *until* we got to the wood elves. The resemblance to the Bowery Boys (and particularly the king to Leo Gorcey) was so pronounced that I literally felt quite sick.

But the visuals were indeed not so awful as the adaptation. To leave out Beorn could be "excused" by time factors; to leave out the Arkenstone was to rip out a major factor of the book.

But the adaptation was not nearly so bad as the sound track. The goblins marching into the cave sounded like nothing so much as Nelson Eddy and his troops from *Naughty Marietta*, and the warbling of the "ballad of the hobbit" by Glen Yarbrough simply defies description.

To conclude, I realize that I have left myself open to the accusation of violating one of my own prime tenets, that is of judging a film as a film and not by its literary antecedents. I can only say that: (1) the long-winded intro was meant to show that there was no way in the world I could be filmically objective in this case, (2) I think that enough of the readers of this column — and of the viewing public, for that matter — are involved in the book to the extent that I am speaking for them, and (3) I think this film was made, not to make a great, or even individual work of cinema, but to exploit the popularity of the book.

And by the way, does anyone have a copy of the Swedish edition of Tolkien illustrated by Tove Jannson they'd like to get rid of?

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From Christopher Priest: "Born 1943 and lived all my life in England. After a relatively normal education (subnormal results), I went to London as something laughingly known as an accountant. Not many laughs, as it turned out, and after long enough I made my excuses and left." Mr. Priest has been writing for twelve years, eight full-time, has published several novels (The Space Machine, The Inverted World *and, most recently, from Scribners,* The Perfect Lover), *and is just beginning to be recognized as one of the major talents in sf.*

The Watched

by CHRISTOPHER PRIEST

i

Sometimes Jenessa was slow to leave in the mornings, reluctant to return to the frustrations of her job; and when she lingered in his house on these occasions, Yvann Ordier had difficulty in concealing his impatience. This morning was one such, and he lurked outside the door of the shower cubicle while she bathed, fingering the smooth leather case of his binoculars.

Ordier was alert to Jenessa's every movement, each variation in sound giving him as clear a picture as there would be if the door were wide open and the plastic curtain held back: the spattering of droplets against the curtain as she raised an arm, the lowering in pitch of the hissing water as she bent to wash a leg, the fat drops plopping soapily on the tiled floor as she stood erect to shampoo her hair. He could visualize her glistening body in every detail, and thinking of their love-making during the night, he felt a renewed lust for her.

He knew he was standing too obviously by the door, too transparently waiting for her. So he put down the binoculars case and went into the kitchen and heated some coffee. He waited until it had percolated, then left it on the hot plate. Jenessa had still not finished her shower; Ordier paused by the door of the cubicle and knew by the sound of the water that she was rinsing her hair. He could imagine her with her face uplifted towards the spray, her long dark hair plastered flatly back above her ears. She often stood like this for several minutes, letting the water run into her open mouth before dribbling away, coursing down her body; twin streams of droplets would fall from her nipples, a tiny rivulet would snake through her pubic hair, a thin film would gloss her buttocks and thighs.

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Again torn between desire and impatience, Ordier went to his bureau, unlocked it, and took out his scintilla detector.

He checked the batteries first; they were sound, but he knew they would have to be replaced soon. He made frequent use of the detector, because he had discovered by chance a few weeks before that his house had become infested with several of the microscopic scintillas, and since then he had been searching for them every day.

There was a signal the instant he turned the detector on, and he walked through the house listening for subtle changes in the pitch and volume of the electronic howl. He traced the scintilla to the bedroom, and by switching in the directional circuit and holding the instrument close to the floor, he found it a few moments later. It was in the carpet, near where Jenessa's clothes were folded over a chair.

Ordier parted the tufts of the carpet and picked up the scintilla with a pair of tweezers. He took it through into his study. This was the third he had discovered this week, and although there was every chance that it had been brought into the house on someone's shoes, it was nevertheless unsettling to find one. He put in on a slide, then peered at it through his microscope. There was no serial number.

Jenessa had left the shower and was standing by the door of the study.

"What are you doing?" she said.

"Another scintilla," Ordier said. "In the bedroom."

"You're always finding them. I thought they were undetectable."

"I've got a gadget that locates them."

"You never told me."

Ordier straightened and turned to face her. She was naked, with a turban of golden toweling around her hair.

"I've made some coffee," he said. "Let's have it on the patio."

Jenessa walked away, her legs and back still moist from the shower. Ordier watched her, thinking of the Qataari girl in the valley, and wishing that his response to Jenessa could be less complicated. In the last few weeks she had become at once more immediate and more distant, because she aroused in him desires that could not be fulfilled by the Qataari girl.

He turned back to the mircoscope and pulled the slide gently away. He tipped the scintilla into a quiet-case — a soundproof, lightproof box where twenty or more of the tiny lenses were already kept — then went to the kitchen. He collected the percolator and cups and went outside to the heat and the rasping of crickets.

Jenessa sat in the sunlight of the patio, combing the tangles from her long, fine hair. As the sun played on her, the water dried, and she talked of her plans for the day.

"There's someone I'd like you to meet," she said. "He's coming to dinner this evening."

"Who is he?" Ordier said, disliking any interruption of his routine.

"A colleague. He's just arrived from the north." Jenessa was sitting with the sun bright behind her, outlining her bronzed body. She was at ease when naked, beautiful and sexual and aware

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of it.

"What's he here for?"

"To try to observe the Qataari. He knows the difficulties, apparently, but he's been given a research grant. I suppose he should be allowed to spend it."

"But why should I have to meet him?"

Jenessa reached across, took his hand briefly. "You don't have to... but I'd like him to meet you."

Ordier was stirring the sugar in the bowl, watching it heap and swirl like a viscid liquid. Each of the grains was larger than a scintilla, and a hundred of the tiny lenses scattered in the sugar would probably go unnoticed. How many scintillas were left in the dregs of coffee cups, how many were accidentally swallowed?

Jenessa lay back across the lounger, and her breasts flattened across her chest. Her nipples were erect and she had raised a leg, knowing that he was admiring her.

"You like to stare," she said, giving him a shrewd look from her dark-set eyes, and she turned towards him on her side, so that her large breasts appeared to fill again. "But you don't like being watched, do you?"

"What do you mean?"

"The scintillas. You're very quiet whenever you find one."

"Am I?" Ordier said, not aware that Jenessa had been noticing. He always tried to make light of them. "There are so many around... all over the island. There's no evidence anyone's planting them."

"You don't like finding them, though."

"No.... Do you?"

"I don't look for them."

In common with most of the people who lived on the islands of the Dream Archipelago, Ordier and Jenessa did not speak very often of their past lives. In the islands, past and future were effectively suspended by the Covenant of Neutrality. The future was sealed, as were the islands themselves, for until the conclusion of the war on the southern continent no one was permitted to leave the archipelago; no one, that is, except the crews of ships and the troops of both combatant sides who constantly passed through. The future of the islands would be determined by the war, and the war was indeterminate; it had continued for more than two centuries and was as entrenched now as it had been fifty years before.

With a sense of future removed, the past became irrelevant, and those who came to the archipelago, choosing the permanence of neutrality, made a conscious decision to abandon their former lives. Yvann Ordier was one amongst thousands of such émigrés; he had never told Jenessa how he had made his fortune, how he had paid for his passage to the archipelago. All he had told her was that he had been prodigiously successful in business, enabling him to take an early retirement.

She, for her part, spoke little of her background, although Ordier realized this was a characteristic of native islanders, rather than a desire to forget a doubtful past. He knew she had been born on the island of Lanna and that she was an anthropologist attempting, unsuccessfully, to study the refugee Qataari.

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What Ordier did not want to reveal to Jenessa was how he came to possess a scintilla detector.

He did not want to speak of past nefariousness, nor of his rôle in the deliberate proliferation of the scintilla surveillance lenses. A few years before, when he had been more opportunistic to a degree that now alienated him from the memory of his younger self, Ordier had seen the chance to make a great deal of money, and he had taken the chance unscrupulously. At that time, the war on the southern continent had settled into an expensive and attritional impasse, and the enterprises sections of the armed forces had been raising money by unconventional means. One of these was the selling of commercial franchises for some of their hitherto classified equipment; Ordier, with a ruthlessness that shocked him in retrospect, had obtained exploitation rights to the scintillas.

His formula for success was simple: he sold the scintillas to one side of the market, and the detectors to the other. Once the potential of the miniature transmitters had been recognized, his fortune had been assured. Soon, Ordier was selling more scintillas than the army ordnance factories could produce, and demand continued to rise. Although Ordier's organization remained the prime distributor of the scintillas and their computerized image-retrieval equipment, unauthorized copies were soon available on the underground market. Within a year after Ordier opened his agency, the saturation distribution of the scintillas meant that no room or building was closed to the eyes and ears of one's rivals. No one had ever found a way of jamming the tiny transmitters; no one ever knew for sure just who was watching and listening.

For the next three and a half years, Ordier's personal fortune had been amassed. During the same period, paralleling his rise in wealth, a deeper, inner sense of moral responsibility grew in him. The way of life in the civilized northern continent had been permanently changed: scintillas were used in such profusion that nowhere was entirely free of them. They were in the streets, in the gardens, in the houses. Even in the erstwhile privacy of one's bed one never knew for sure that a stranger was not listening, watching, recording.

At last, with the guilt of his participation overwhelming any other motivation, Ordier took himself and his fortune to the permanent exile of the Dream Archipelago, knowing that his departure from the world of eavesdropping commerce would make not the slightest difference to its accelerating growth, but that he wanted no more part in it.

He found the island of Tumo by chance, and he built his house in the remote eastern part, well away from the populous mountainous region in the west... but even on Tumo there were scintillas. Some were from the armies, in breach of the covenant; a few were from commercial companies, and some, most numerous, were uncoded and thus untraceable.

Jenessa was right when she said that he did not like to find scintillas in his house, but those represented an intrusion of his own privacy; he had no opinions about the ones scattered over the

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rest of the island. For the past two years he had tried, with a considerable measure of success, to put the scintillas from his mind.

His life now was centred on Jenessa, on his house, on his growing collections of books and antiques. Until the beginning of this island summer he had felt reasonably happy, relaxed and coming to terms with his conscience. But at the end of the Tumoit spring, with the first spell of hot weather, he had made a certain discovery, and as a result a new obsession had grown within him.

It was focused on the bizarre, castellated folly that was built on the ridge on the eastern border of his grounds. There, in the sun-warmed granite walls, was his obsession. There was the Qataari girl, the Qataari ritual; there he listened and watched, as hidden from those he observed as the men who decoded the mosaic of images from the ubiquitous scintillas.

ii

Jenessa lounged in the sun and drank her coffee and then poured herself a second cup. She yawned and lay back in the sun, her hair dry now and shining in the light. Ordier wondered if she was intending to stay all day, as she sometimes did. He enjoyed their lazy days together, alternating between swimming in the pool, love-making and sunbathing... but the previous evening she had been talking of spending the day in Tumo Town, and he was uncertain of her intentions. At last, though, she went into the bedroom to dress, and afterwards they walked together down to her car. There were last words and kisses, and then she drove away.

Ordier stood idly by the trees under which she had left her car overnight, waiting to wave to her as she turned from the track to the main road leading towards Tumo Town. The brisk wind of the evening before had died, and the cloud of white dust thrown up by the wheels hovered behind the car... and long after Jenessa had passed from sight, Ordier stared after her. She sometimes returned unexpectedly.

When the dust had settled and his view across to the distant white buildings of the town was interrupted by nothing more than the shimmering of early heat, Ordier turned back to his house and walked quickly up the slope to the main door.

Once inside the house he made no attempt to conceal the impatience he had been suppressing while Jenessa was there. He hurried to his study and found his binoculars, then went through the house and left by the door which opened on to the rough ground behind. A short walk took him to the high stone wall that ran laterally across the ridge, and he unlocked the padlock on the stout wooden gate and let himself through. Beyond was a sandy, sun-whitened courtyard, surrounded on all sides by walls, and already hot in the windless day. Ordier made sure that the gate was locked on the inside, then climbed steadily up the slope towards the angular height of the battlemented folly on the summit of the ridge.

It was this folly and its walled courtyard that Ordier had first chanced upon, and with the same recklessness of spirit of the madman who had built it three centuries before, he bought it and the land around it after the most cur-

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sory of inspections. Only later, when the headiness of the purchase faded, had he taken a second, calmer look at his new property and realized that the place was completely uninhabitable. So, not without regret, he had hired a local firm of builders, and his house had been put up a short distance away.

The ridge that marked the eastern boundary of his property ran due north and south for several miles, and for most of its length it was unscalable, except by someone equipped with climbing boots and ropes. It was not so much that it was high — on its western side it rose on average about two hundred feet above the plain — but that it was broken and jagged, and the rocks were sharp and friable. In the geophysical past there must have been a tumultuous upheaval, compressing and raising the land along some deep-lying fault, the crust snagging upwards like two sheets of brittle steel rammed against each other's edge.

It was on the summit of this ridge that the folly had been built, although at what expense in human life and ingenuity Ordier could not imagine. It balanced on the broken rocks, a daring edifice, and a tribute to the singularity and eccentricity of its architect.

When Ordier had seen and bought the folly, the valley which lay beyond it had been a wide tract of desert land, muddy and overgrown with rank vegetation, or cracked, barren and dusty, according to the season. But that had been before the coming of the Qataari, and all that that had entailed.

A flight of steps had been built across the inner wall of the folly, leading eventually to the battlements. Before Ordier had moved into his house, he had paid the builders to reinforce most of the steps with steel and concrete, but the last few had been left unrepaired. The battlements could be reached, but only with difficulty.

About halfway up, well before the last of the reinforced steps, Ordier reached the fault that had been contrived carefully inside the main wall.

He glanced back, staring down from his vertiginous perch across the land beneath. There was his house, its evenly tiled roofs glittering in the sunlight; beyond, the untamed stretch of scrubland, and beyond that the buildings of Tumo Town, a sprawling modern settlement built on the ruins of the seaport that had been sacked at the outbreak of the war. In the far distance were the brown and purple heights of the Tumoit Mountains, rich in the mythology of the Dream Archipelago.

To north and south Ordier could see the splendent silver of the sea. Somewhere to the north, on the horizon, was the island of Muriseay, invisible today because of the haze.

Ordier turned away from the view and stepped through into the fault in the wall, squeezing between two overlapping slabs of masonry which, even on close inspection, seemed to be so solidly in place that nothing could lie behind them. But there was a warm, dark space beyond, high enough and wide enough for a man to stand. Ordier wriggled through the gap and stood inside on the narrow ledge, breathing quickly after his climb.

The brilliant sunlight outside had dulled his eyes, and the tiny space was a cell of blackness. The only light came

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from a horizontal crack in the outer wall, a slit of shining sky that seemed, in contrast with the rest, to darken, not lighten, the cell.

When his breathing had steadied, Ordier stepped forward onto the ledge where he generally stood, feeling with his foot for the slab of rock. Beneath him was the inner cavity of the wall, falling irregularly to the foundations far below. He braced himself with his elbow against the wall as he transferred his weight, and at once a sweet fragrance reached his nostrils. As he brought his second foot onto the slab, he glanced down and saw in the dim light a pale, mottled coloring on the ledge.

The smell was distinctive: Qataari roses. Ordier remembered the hot southerly wind of the day before — the Naalattan, as it was called on Tumo — and the whirling vortex of light and color that had risen above the valley floor, as the fragrant petals of the Qataari roses had scattered and circled. Many of the petals had been lifted by the wind as high as his vantage point here in the cell, and some had seemed to hover within grasping distance of his fingers. He had had to leave his hidden cell to meet Jenessa, and he had not seen the end of the warm blizzard of petals before he left.

The fragrance of the Qataari rose was known to be narcotic, and the cloying smell released as his feet crushed the petals was sweet in his nose and mouth. Ordier kicked and scuffed at the petals that had been blown onto the shelf and swept them down into the cavity of the wall.

At last he leaned forward to the slit that looked outwards into the valley; here too the wind had deposited a few petals, and Ordier brushed them away with his fingers, careful that they fell into the cavity beneath him and not out into the open air.

He raised his binoculars to his eyes and leaned forward until the metal hoods over the object lenses rested on the stone edge of the horizontal slit. With rising excitement he stared down at the Qataari in the valley below.

iii

In the evening, Ordier drove over to Jenessa's apartment in Tumo Town. He went reluctantly, partly because of the necessity of making civil conversation with strangers — something he was habitually unwilling to do — and partly because he had more than a suspicion that the talk would center around the Qataari refugees. Jenessa had said that her visitor was a colleague, which meant that he was an anthropologist, and anthropologists only came to Tumo to study the Qataari. Since his discovery in the folly, Ordier found all discussion of the Qataari unbearably unpleasant, as if some private domain of his own was being invaded. For this and other reasons, Ordier had never told Jenessa what he knew.

The other guests had already arrived when Ordier walked in, and Jenessa introduced them as Jacj and Luovi Parren. His first impression of Parren was unfavorable: he was a short, overweight and intense man, who shook Ordier's hand with nervous, jerky movements, then turned away at once to continue the conversation with Jenessa that Ordier's arrival had interrupted.

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Normally, Ordier would have bridled at the snub, but Jenessa flashed him a soothing look, and anyway he was in no mood to try to like the man.

He poured himself a drink and went to sit beside Luovi, Parren's wife.

During the aperitifs and the meal, the conversation stayed on general subjects, with the islands of the archipelago the main topic. Parren and his wife had only just arrived from the north and were anxious to hear what they could about various islands where they might make a home. The only islands they had so far seen were Muriseay — which was where most immigrants arrived — and Tumo.

Ordier noticed that when he and Jenessa were talking about the other islands they knew, it was Luovi who showed the most interest, and she kept asking how far they were from Tumo.

"Jacj must be near his work," she said to Ordier.

"I think I told you, Yvann," Jenessa said. "Jacj is here to study the Qataari."

"Yes, of course."

"I know what you're thinking, Ordier," Parren said. "Why should I succeed where others have failed? Let me say just this, that I wouldn't have left the mainland to pursue something I thought was an insurmountable problem. There are ways that haven't been tried yet."

"We were talking about this before you arrived," Jenessa said. "Jacj believes he can do better than us."

"How do you feel about that?" Ordier said.

Jenessa shrugged and looked at Jacj and his wife. "I don't have any personal ambition."

"Ambition, Jenessa dear, is the foundation of achievement." Luovi's smile across the table, first at Jenessa, then at Ordier, was brittle.

"For a social anthropologist?" Ordier said.

"For all scientists. Jacj has taken leave from a brilliant career to study the Qataari. But of course you would know his work already."

"Naturally."

Ordier was wondering how long it would be before Parren, or his wife, realized that one never took "leave" to visit the archipelago. Luovi probably imagined, in anticipation of her husband's success, that completed research into the Qataari society would buy them a ticket back to the north, where the brilliant career would be resumed. The islands were full of exiles who had once nurtured similar illusions.

Ordier was looking covertly at Jenessa, trying to imagine how she was taking all this. She had spoken truly when she denied personal ambition, but that was not the whole story.

Because Jenessa was archipelago-born, she had a sense of nationalism, embracing all the islands, that Ordier himself lacked. She had sometimes talked of the history of the archipelago, of the distant years when the Covenant of Neutrality had first come into being. A few of the islands had put up resistance to the enforced neutralization; for some years there had been a unity of purpose, but the big nations had eventually overcome the resistance. The whole archipelago was said to be pacified now, but contact between the islands, for most of the ordinary inhabi-

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tants, was restricted to the mail the ferries carried, and one never knew for sure just what was happening in the remoter areas of the archipelago. Occasionally there were rumors of sabotage on one or another of the islands, or of one of the armies' rest camps being attacked, but, on the whole, everyone was waiting for the war to end.

Jenessa did have a purpose to her work, although it was not of the same order as Jacj Parren's aggressive aspiration to fame. Ordier knew that she, and other island-born scientists, saw knowledge as a key to freedom, that when the war was over such knowledge would help liberate the archipelago. She had no illusions about the immediate worth of her own calling — without access to the dominant societies of the north, whatever research she concluded would be futile — but it was knowledge nonetheless.

"Where do you fit into all this, Yvann?" Parren was saying. "You're not an anthropologist, I gather?"

"You gather it correctly. I'm retired."

"So young?"

"Not so young as it appears."

"Jenessa was telling me you live up by the Qataari valley. I don't suppose it's possible to see their camp from there?"

"You can climb the rocks," Ordier said. "I'll take you up there, but you wouldn't see anything. The Qataari have guards all along the ridge."

"Ah... then I could see the guards!"

"Of course. I don't suppose, though, you would find it very satisfactory. As soon as they see you, they'll turn their backs."

Parren was lighting a cigar from one of the candles on the table, and he leaned back with a smile and blew smoke into the air. "A response of sorts."

"The only one," Jenessa said. "It's worthless as an observation because it's responsive to the presence of the observer."

"But it fits a pattern."

"Does it?" Jenessa said. "How are we to know? We should be concerned with what they would do if we weren't there."

"You say that's impossible to discover," Parren said.

"And if we weren't here at all? If there was no one else on the island?"

"Now you delve into the realms of fantasy. Anthropology is a pragmatic science, my dear. We are as concerned with the impact of the modern world on isolated societies as we are with the societies themselves. If we must, we intrude on the Qataari and evaluate their response to that. It is a better study than no study."

"Do you think that hasn't been tried?" Jenessa said. "There is simply no point: the Qataari wait for us to leave, and wait, and wait...."

"Just as I said. A response of sorts."

"But a meaningless one!" Jenessa said. "It becomes a trial of patience."

"Which the Qataari must necessarily win?"

"Look, Jacj." Jenessa, visibly irritated now, was leaning forward across the table, and Ordier noticed that strands of her hair were falling across the uneaten dessert on her plate. "When the Qataari were first landed here, about a year and a half ago, a

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team went into the camp. We were testing exactly the kind of response you're talking about. We made no secret of our presence, nor of what we wanted. The Qataari simply waited. They sat or stood exactly wherever they were when they noticed us. They did *nothing* for seventeen days. They didn't eat, drink, speak. They slept where they were, and if that happened to be in a muddy pool, or on stony ground, then it made no difference."

"What about the children?"

"Children too... like the adults."

"And bodily functions? And what about pregnant women... did they just sit down and wait for you to leave?"

"Yes, Jacj... in fact, it was because of two pregnant women that the experiment had to be called off. We were frightened of what might be happening to them. As it turned out, they both had to be taken to hospital."

"Did they resist?"

"Of course not."

Luovi said, "But then Jacj is surely right? It is a social response to the outside world."

"It's no response at all!" Jenessa said. "It's the opposite of a response, it's the stopping of *all* activity. I can show you the films we took... the people didn't even fidget. They simply watched us, and waited for us to leave."

"Then they were in some kind of trance?"

"No, they were *waiting!*"

Watching Jenessa's animated expression, Ordier wondered if he recognized in her some of his own dilemma about the Qataari. She had always claimed that her interest in them was a scientific one, but in every other aspect of her life she was rarely detached from an emotional reaction to people. And the Qataari were special people, not just to anthropologists.

Of all the races in the world, the Qataari were simultaneously the best and the least known. There was not a nation on the northern continent that did not have an historical or social link with the Qataari in some form. For one country, there would be the story of the Qataari warriors who had left their homeland to fight for their side in some long-forgotten war; for another, there would be the heritage of public buildings or palaces built by Qataari architects and masons; for yet another, there would be the tales of the Qataari doctors who had come in times of plague.

Physically, the Qataari were a beautiful people: it was said in Ordier's own country, for instance, that the model for Edrona — symbol of male potency, wisdom and mystery, captured in a marble sculpture and famous throughout the world — had been a Qataari. Similarly, a Qataari woman, painted by Vaskarreta nine centuries before, embodied sensual beauty and virginal lust; her face, pirated in the cause of commerce, glowed out from the labels of a dozen different types of cosmetics.

Yet for all the legends and visited history, the civilized world knew almost nothing of the Qataari homeland.

The Qataari were indigenous to the southern continent, the wild tract of land where the war had been fought for the last two centuries. On the northern coast, the Qataari peninsula points a long, cliff-bound finger of land into the Midway Sea, seeming to stretch out to touch the more southerly islands of the

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Dream Archipelago. The peninsula is joined to the mainland by a narrow, swampy isthmus, and beyond that, where the first mountains rise, there always stood a line of guards... but guards like no other. The Qataari did not try to prevent others entering, but guarded themselves so that there was always warning of the presence of outsiders. In fact, few people had ever been to the peninsula. The way across land was through dense tropical jungle, and an approach from the sea was made difficult by the fact that along the entire coastline there was only one tiny jetty. The Qataari community seemed to be self-sufficient in every way, and their customs, culture and social structure were all but unknown.

The Qataari were thought to be of unique cultural importance in the world: their society apparently represented a link between the civilized nations of the north, the culturally homogeneous people of the archipelago and the barbarians and peasants of the south. Several ethnologists had visited the peninsula over the years, but all had been frustrated in their work by the same silent waiting that Jenessa had described.

Only one aspect of their life had been established, although its details were as much conjecture as knowledge: the Qataari dramatized. Aerial photographs, and the reports of visitors, revealed that there were open-air auditoria by every village, and there were always people gathered there. The speculation was that the Qataari depended on drama as a symbolic means of action: for decision making, for the resolution of problems, for celebrations.

What few pieces of Qataari literature had reached the world's libraries were baffling to a non-Qataari readership; the prose and verse were impenetrably elliptical, and any character named within, as well as having a seemingly endless list of contracted, familiar or formal names, played a symbolic rôle, representing a part in a scheme much larger than the apparent subject matter. The few Qataari who traveled, who visited the northern continent, spoke obliquely of such matters, seeing themselves as actors in a cultural play. (One Qataari, in Ordier's country a few years before, had been secretly filmed; evidently deep within a personal drama of his own, the Qataari remonstrated with himself, declaimed to an empty hall, wept and shouted. A few minutes later the same man had been seen at a public reception, and no one present had discerned anything unusual about his behavior.)

The war had come, inevitably, to the Qataari peninsula. It had begun when one of the two combatant sides had started the construction of a deep-water refueling base on the northernmost tip of the peninsula. As this was an area hitherto unclaimed by either side, it constituted a breach of whatever neutrality the Qataari had enjoyed until then. The opposing side had invaded the peninsula, and before long a devastating struggle had begun. Soon the Qataari knew, as the rest of their continent knew, the shattering totality of the war, with its neural dissociation gases, its scintillas, its scatterflames, its acid rains. The villages were flattened, the rose plantations burned, the people killed in thousands; in a few weeks the

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Qataari society was destroyed. A relief mission was sent from the north, and within a few weeks the surviving Qataari were evacuated unresisting from their homeland. They had been brought to Tumo — one of the islands nearest to the peninsula — and a refugee camp had been built for them. They were housed and fed by the Tumoit authorities, but the Qataari, independent as ever, did what they could to close their camp to the outside world. In the first few days huge canvas screens had been put up around the perimeter fence, silent guards stood by all the entrances. Everyone who had entered the camp since — medical teams, agricultural advisers, builders — returned with the same report: the Qataari were waiting.

It was not polite waiting, it was not impatient waiting. As Jenessa had said, it was a cessation of activity, a long silence.

Ordier realized that Jacj Parren and Jenessa were still arguing and that Parren was addressing him:

"...you say that if we climbed this ridge of yours, we would see guards?"

"Yes." Jenessa answered for him.

"But why are they there? I thought they never left the camp."

"They're growing roses in the valley. The Qataari roses."

Parren leaned back in his chair with a grunt of satisfaction. "Then at least they can be studied doing that!"

Jenessa looked helplessly at Ordier across the table. He stared back at her, trying not to reveal anything with his expression. He was sitting forward with his elbows on the edge of the table, his hands linked in front of his face. He had had a shower before driving to Jenessa's this evening, but a certain fragrance was still on his skin. He could smell it as he looked back at her, feeling a trace of the pleasant sexual arousal that was induced by the petals of the Qataari rose.

iv

Jacj Parren and his wife were staying in a hotel in Tumo Town, and the next morning Jenessa went round to see them. Ordier left with her, and they walked together as far as his car. Their embrace in the street was cool for the benefit of the passers-by; it was no reflection of the night they had passed together, which had been more than usually passionate.

Ordier drove slowly back to his house, more reluctant than he could remember to succumb to the temptations of the cell in the folly wall, but at the same time more intrigued than ever about what he might see.

The conversation over dinner had done that for him, a reminder of its guilty associations with Jenessa, both as a sexual partner and as someone who had a genuine scientific interest in the Qataari.

At the start he had made the excuse to himself that what he saw was so insignificant, so fragmentary, that it was irrelevant. But his knowledge of the Qataari had grown, and with it the secret... and a tacit bond had been tied: to speak of the Qataari would be to betray a trust he had created in his own mind.

As he parked the car and walked up to the house, Ordier added further justification to his silence by reminding

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himself of how much he had disliked Parren and his wife. He knew that prolonged exposure to the seductive laziness of Tumoit life, and to the lassitude of the ways of the archipelago in general, would change Parren in the end, but until then he would be an abrasive influence on Jenessa. She would seek the Qataari more eagerly, renewing her own interest in their affairs.

The house was stuffy from being closed for the night, and Ordier walked around the rooms, opening the windows, throwing back the shutters. There was a light breeze, and in the garden that he had neglected all summer the overgrown flowers and shrubs were waving gently. He stared at them, trying to make up his mind.

He knew that the dilemma could be resolved by the simple decision not to go up to the folly again; he could ignore the Qataari, could continue with his life as it had been until the beginning of this summer. But the conversation the evening before had heightened his awareness of the Qataari, reminded him of the special curiosities they aroused. It wasn't for nothing that the romantic and erotic impulses of the great composers, writers and artists had been stimulated by the Qataari, that the legends and daydreams persisted, that the societies of the north had been so thoroughly impregnated by the enigma that there was hardly a graffito that did not reflect it, nor a pornographic fiction that did not perpetuate it. Voluntary abstention from his obsession was an agony to Ordier. He distracted himself for a time by taking a swim in his pool and then later by opening one of the chests he had had sent from the mainland and setting the books on shelves in his study, but by midday the curiosity was like a nagging hunger, and he found his binoculars and walked up the ridge to the folly.

v

More petals had appeared in the cell in his absence. Ordier brushed them away from the slit with his fingers, then turned his binoculars first towards the Qataari camp, which lay on the far side of the shallow valley. On this day, as on all days, the high screens surrounding it were drawn tightly together. The breeze was stirring them, and great slow ripples moved laterally across the canvas blinds. His glasses did not have the necessary magnification, but Ordier nevertheless felt a sense of intrigue, hoping that the wind would make a momentary aperture in the screens so that he might glimpse what lay beyond.

In front of the camp, spreading across the floor of the valley, was the plantation of Qataari roses: a sea of scarlet and pink and green. So closely were the shrubs planted that from this elevation Ordier could see the yellow, clayey soil only at the edge of the plantation.

He stared for a few minutes, relishing the privilege he was stealing.

It was the workers in the rose plantation he had first watched from this cell. Last night, listening to the dinner conversation, he had heard Parren speak of the possibility of seeing the Qataari at work in the roses; remembering his own excitement of discovery, Ordier had for the first and only time felt a trace of sympathy with the man.

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There was a small group of men standing amongst the roses and talking volubly. After a while, two of them walked away and picked up large panniers. They walked slowly between the rose bushes, plucking the largest, reddest flowers. They were quite oblivious of his silent watching.

Ordier found this undetected intrusion into the Qataari privacy to be deeply exciting and satisfying.

The weeks he had been spying on the Qataari had taught him to be systematic, and Ordier looked with the binoculars at each of the rose pickers in turn. Many of them were women, and it was at these he looked most carefully. There was one woman in particular he was seeking; she had been amongst the rose pickers the first time he noticed her. He knew her, quite simply, as the one. He had never given her a name, not even a familiar one as shorthand for his recognition of her. She did remind him, in some ways, of Jenessa, but with the abundant opportunities he had had to watch her he now realized that whatever similarities he had once detected were symptoms of his guilt response.

She was younger than Jenessa, taller, undeniably more beautiful. Where Jenessa was dark in hair and complexion, with a sensuality and intelligence that attracted him, the Qataari woman, the Qataari girl, had fragility and vulnerability trapped in the body of a sexually mature woman. Sometimes, when she was near the folly, Ordier had seen a captivating expression in her eyes: knowingness and hesitation, invitation and wariness. Her hair was golden, her skin was pale; she had the classic proportions of the Qataari ideal. She was, for Ordier, the embodiment of Vaskarreta's avenging victim.

And Jenessa was real, Jenessa was available. The Qataari girl was remote and forbidden, forever inaccessible to him.

When he had made sure the girl was not in the rose plantation, Ordier lowered the binoculars and leaned forward until his forehead was pressing against the rough rock slab, placing his eyes as near as possible. He looked down towards the arena the Qataari had built at the foot of the folly wall, and saw her at once.

She was standing near one of the twelve hollow metal statues that surrounded the leveled area. She was not alone — she was never alone — and the others, although apparently paying little attention to her, were circling her. They were tidying up and preparing the arena: the statues were being cleaned and polished, the gravelly soil of the arena floor was being swept, and handfuls of the Qataari rose petals were being scattered in all directions.

The girl was watching all this, often addressed by some of the men, but never responding. She was dressed as usual in red: a long, enfolding garment that lay loosely and bulkily on her body like a toga, but which was made up of many different panels of fabric, lying one on top of the other.

Silently, slowly, Ordier raised the binoculars to his eyes and focused them on her face. The magnification at once lent him the illusion that he was nearer to her, and, as a consequence, he felt much more exposed to her.

Seeing her as closely as this, Ordier noticed at once that the garment was

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tied loosely at the neck and was slipping down on one side. He could see the curve of her shoulder and just beneath it the first hint of the rise of her breast. He stared at her, transfixed by her innocent and unconscious beauty.

There was no noticeable signal for the beginning of the ritual; the preparations led imperceptibly to the first movements of the ceremony. The two women scattering the rose petals turned from casting them across the sandy floor to throwing them over the girl. Twelve of the men, until then apparently still cleaning the statuary, pulled open the hinged backs of each figure and took up their places inside, and the remaining men began to circle the arena as the girl stepped forward to take her place at the center.

This much was familiar to Ordier; soon the chanting would begin. Each time he saw this ritual unfold, Ordier was aware that it had been minimally advanced from the time before. Each time there was a renewed sense of the dual possibilities of the girl's sexual rôle.

The chanting began, soft and low, inharmonious. The girl turned slowly where she stood, her garment swinging about her limbs; Ordier saw glimpses of ankle, elbow, stomach, hip, and he knew she was naked beneath it. As she turned she was looking intently at each man in the circle, as if trying to select one.

More petals were thrown, and as the girl turned in the arena her feet trampled and crushed them. Ordier fancied he could smell them from where he stood, although he knew that the fragrance probably came from the petals he had found in the cell.

The next stage was also one Ordier had witnessed before. One of the women who had been throwing the petals suddenly tossed aside her basket and stepped directly towards the girl. As she stood before her she raised her hands to her bodice and pulled aside the cloth to bare her own breasts. She thrust out her chest. The girl responded by raising her hands to her chest and running them tentatively and exploratively across herself. She had at once the innocence of an adolescent and the sensuality of a woman. No sooner had her hands cupped her breasts through the fabric of the toga than one of the men left the others and ran into the arena. He knocked aside the woman with the bared breasts, and she fell across the ground. He turned and went back to his place in the circle.

The woman got to her feet, closed her bodice, found her basket and threw more petals. A few minutes later the whole incident was repeated when the second woman went forward to the girl.

Ordier watched this happen seven or eight times, wondering, as he always wondered, where it was to lead. He was impatient for a further development, for apart from his having had the briefest glimpses of the girl's naked body accidentally revealed on occasions in the past, the ceremony had never proceeded beyond this. He lowered his binoculars and leaned forward again, watching the whole scene.

He was obsessed with the girl; in his fantasies he imagined that this ceremony took place here, beneath the wall of his folly, for his own exclusive benefit... that the girl was being readied in

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some mysterious way for him alone. But those were the fantasies of solitude; when he was here, watching the Qataari ritual, he was always aware of his rôle as secret intruder on their world, an observer as incapable of affecting the proceedings as the girl herself seemed to be.

Ordier knew, though, that his passivity went only so far as a lack of direct action; in another way he was deeply involved, because as he watched he always became sexually aroused. He could feel the tightness in his groin, the rise of physical excitement.

Suddenly the girl moved, and Ordier's attention returned. As one of the women went across to her, already pulling at the strings of her bodice, the girl moved to meet her, snatching at one of the long panels of her toga. The woman cried out, and her large, sagging breasts swung again into view... and simultaneously the girl tore at her garment at the front and let the piece of cloth fall from her hands.

Ordier, looking again through his binoculars, saw an infuriatingly brief glimpse of the nakedness beneath... then the girl turned away and her voluminous garment swung across her. She took two steps, stumbled, and fell forwards, lying across the place where the rose petals lay deepest. At this, one of the men went into the arena, brushed the woman aside and stood over the girl. He prodded her with his foot, then pushed her, turning her over on to her back.

She appeared to be unconscious. The toga was in disarray, riding up her legs. Where she had torn part of it away, a strip of diagonal nudity was revealed. It ran between her breasts, across her stomach, across one hip. Through his binoculars Ordier could see a trace of pubic hair, a hint, a few strands.

The man stood over her, half crouching, rubbing his hands across his genitals...

And Ordier watched, surrendering to the exquisite sensation of sexual excitement.

As he came to physical climax, releasing wetly into his trousers, he saw through the shaking lenses of the binoculars that the girl had opened her eyes and was staring upwards with a dazed, delirious expression. She seemed to be looking directly at him... and Ordier moved back from the crack in the wall, ashamed and embarrassed.

vi

Two days later, Jacj and Luovi Parren came to Ordier's house in the early morning, and after they had shared a token breakfast, the two men set off towards the ridge, leaving Jenessa to entertain Luovi.

As Ordier had suggested to him the day before, Parren had equipped himself with stout boots and old clothing, and they climbed roped together, but even so Parren slipped before they had climbed very far. He slithered down the crumbling face of a huge boulder, brought up short as Ordier took his weight on the rope.

Ordier secured the rope, then scrambled down to him. The portly little man had regained his feet and was looking ruefully at grazes on his arm and leg, showing through the torn cloth.

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"Do you want to go on?" Ordier said.

"Of course. It's not serious." But the challenge of the climb seemed to have receded, if only temporarily, for he was in no hurry to continue. He looked to the side, where the folly loomed high on the ridge. "That's your castle, isn't it?"

"It's a folly."

"Couldn't we climb up to the battlements? It looks a lot easier that way."

"Easier," Ordier said, "but actually more dangerous. The steps are reinforced only part of the way. Anyway, you'll see better from the ridge, I assure you."

"So you have been up to the battlements?"

"Just once, when I moved into the house. I wouldn't go up there again." Ordier decided to take a chance: "But you could go alone, if you liked."

"No," Parren said, rubbing his arm. "Let's do it this way."

They struggled on, Ordier leading the way across the brittle slabs of rock. It was an ascent that would have posed no problem to practiced rock-climbers, but to two amateurs it was perilous enough. Shortly before they reached the summit, Parren slipped again and cried out as he fell backwards against a boulder beneath him.

"You're making too much noise," Ordier said, when he saw that the man was unhurt. "Do you want the Qataari to hear us before we reach the top?"

"You've done this before... it's different for you."

"I climbed this alone the first time. I didn't make as much row."

"You're younger than me."

The recriminations ceased when Ordier climbed away from him and resumed his position with the rope. He sat down on a slab and stared at Parren, waiting for the climb to continue. The anthropologist continued to sulk for a few more minutes, then seemed to realize that Ordier was doing his best for him. At last he climbed up towards him, and Ordier took in the slack of the rope.

"We'll head for that dip up there," Ordier said quietly. "It was where I went last time, and if the Qataari haven't changed their guard line, you'll find that the guards are some distance away. With any luck, you'll have several minutes before they spot you."

He crawled forward, placing his feet on the best holds he could find, pointing them out mutely to the other man. At last he was lying face-down across a broad slab, just beneath the summit. He waited until Parren was beside him.

"If you'll take more advice from me," Ordier said, "don't use your binoculars at first. Take in the general view, then use your glasses on the nearest objects."

"Why's that?"

"Once they see us, the cry will go up. It radiates outwards from here."

Ordier was wondering what had been going on at the arena since the day his watching had aroused him to the point of orgasm. Disturbed by the degree to which he was becoming involved in the ritual, he had kept away for two days, trying again to rid himself of his obsession. But he was failing, and this climb up the ridge was making the failure more certain.

Parren had his binoculars out, and

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Ordier took his own from their case.

"Are you ready?" he said.

Parren nodded, and they inched forward, peering over the ridge.

Three Qataari guards stood in the valley immediately beneath their vantage point, staring patiently up at them.

Ordier instinctively ducked down again, but in the same instant he heard the Qataari shouting, and he knew they had been noticed.

When he looked again he saw that the warning was rippling outwards. The guards along the valley side of the ridge were turning their backs on Ordier and Parren... and in the rose plantation, along the narrow banks of the river, on the approaches to the camp, the Qataari were halting in whatever they were doing. They stood erect, waiting and waiting.

Parren was holding his binoculars awkwardly, trying to see but trying to keep his head down too.

"You might as well stand up, Parren," Ordier said. "You'll see better."

Ordier himself sat up and settled himself on the edge of the slab. In a moment, Parren followed. The two men looked across the valley.

Ordier had no idea what Parren could now hope to see, but he had his own interest in the valley. He scanned the rose plantation systematically, looking with the powerful glasses from one person to the next. Most of them stood with their backs turned, and from this distance it was difficult to see clearly. There was one female whom Ordier lingered on; it might have been the girl, but he wasn't sure.

He made certain that Parren was busy with his own observations, then turned his glasses toward the foot of the folly wall. The arena itself could not be seen from here, but two of the hollow statues were just visible. He had had no hope of seeing if a ritual had been in progress, but he wanted to see if there were any people about; apart from one of the guards standing near the folly, though, there was no apparent sign of activity.

Ordier didn't know whether he was relieved or annoyed.

Their silent observation continued for several more minutes, but then even Parren admitted that there was nothing further to be gained.

"Would it be worth waiting beneath the ridge for an hour or two?' he said. "I have the time."

"The Qataari have more. We might as well go back."

"They seemed to be expecting us, Ordier."

"I know." Ordier glanced apologetically at the man. "That's probably because I came up to this part of the ridge last time. We should have tried somewhere else."

"Then we could do that another time."

"If you think it's worth it."

They began to make their way down, Ordier taking the lead. The sun was higher now, and the morning wind had stilled, and by the time they were halfway down, both men were feeling the heat.

It was Parren who called a halt first and squatted down in the shade of a huge boulder. Ordier went back up to him and sat beside him. Below them, deceptively near, Ordier's house stood like a bright plastic toy in a field.

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After a while, Parren said, "Jenessa tells me you once worked with scintillas."

Ordier looked at him sharply. "Why did she tell you that?"

"I asked her. Your name was familiar. We both come from the north, after all."

"I've left all that behind me."

"Yes... but not your specialized knowledge."

"What do you want to know?" Ordier said resignedly.

"Everything you can tell me."

"Parren, you've been misinformed. I've retired."

"Then that wasn't a scintilla detector I noticed in your house?"

"Look, I don't see why you're interested."

Parren was sitting forward, away from the rock, and his manner had changed.

"Let's not prevaricate, Ordier. I need some information from you. I want to know if there is any law in the archipelago forbidding the use of scintillas. I want to know if scintillas could be used against the Qataari. And, lastly, if — to the best of your knowledge — the Qataari would have any way of detecting or jamming scintillas."

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

"There's no law against using them. I can tell you that much."

"And the rest?" Parren said.

Ordier sighed. "The scintillas could obviously be used against the Qataari, if you could think of some way of planting them without them knowing."

"That's easy. They can be sown from an aircraft at night."

"I see you've worked it out. But your last question interests me. Why do you think the Qataari would have any means of jamming the scintillas?"

"They've had plenty of experience of them."

"How do you mean?" Ordier said.

"Both sides were using them during the invasion of the peninsula. The military work on saturation principles... scintillas must have been ankle-deep. A race who so obviously dislike being watched would have realized what they were for."

"I was under the impression you thought the Qataari were primitive."

Parren said, "Not primitive... decivilized. Their science is a match for anything we've got."

"How do you know that?"

"An intelligent guess. But answer the question, Ordier... do you think they have any way of jamming scintillas?"

"No one else has, so far as I know. But technology is always advancing."

"Qataari technology?"

"I don't know, Parren."

"Look at this." Parren reached into a pocket and pulled out a small box. Ordier recognized it at once: it was a scintillas quiet-case, identical to the one he used in his house. Parren opened the lid, reached inside with a pair of tweezers he took from a mounting in the lid. "Have you seen one of these before?"

He dropped a scintilla into the palm of Ordier's hand.

Ordier, guessing, said, "It hasn't got a serial number."

"Right. Do you know why?"

"Do you?"

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"I've never encountered it before."

"Neither have I," Ordier said. "Except here on Tumo. My guess is that they're military."

"No, I've checked. They're required by the Yenna Convention to mark them. Both sides abide."

"Then a bootleg?"

"They're usually marked too. A few of the pirates might leave them blank, but these little devils are all over the place. I've seen hundreds since I've been on Tumo."

"You've checked them all?" Ordier said.

"No, but every one I have checked has been blank." Parren picked up the scintilla with the tweezers and returned it to the quiet-case.

"Then whose are they?"

"I was hoping you'd tell me, Ordier."

"You've already revealed that you're better informed than I am."

"Then I'll tell you what I think. They're connected with the Qataari."

Ordier waited, expecting more to follow, but the other man was looking at him in a significant way as if waiting for a response.

He said in the end, "So...?"

"Someone," Parren said with ponderous emphasis, "is spying on the Qataari."

"With what purpose?"

"The same as mine."

And Ordier heard again the edge of Parren's voice he had heard at Jenessa's dinner party. Personal ambition was strong in the man. For a moment Ordier had felt a guilty suspicion growing in him, that Parren had somehow guessed that he had been spying on the Qataari from the folly and that he was about to accuse him. But the man's ambition was so bright it blinded him.

"Then you must clearly join forces with whoever it is, or compete."

"I intend to compete."

"You have your own scintillas?"

Ordier had intended his question sarcastically, but Parren said at once, "Yes... a new version. They're a quarter the size of existing scintillas, and to all intents and purposes are invisible."

"Then there's your answer. You would clearly have the edge."

Ordier's urbane reply gave no clue to his thoughts. He had not known that scintilla technology had advanced so much.

"That's not my answer, Ordier. Do you think the Qataari could either detect or jam my scintillas?"

Ordier smiled grimly. "You've seen how sensitive they are to being watched. It's like a sixth sense. They might or might not have the electronic means of detection, but my guess is that they'd sense your scintillas somehow."

"Do you really think so?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Ordier said. "Perhaps better. Look, I'm thirsty. Why don't we talk about this back at the house? It's too hot for my liking."

Parren agreed, reluctantly it seemed to Ordier, and they continued their clumsy descent of the rocks. When they reached the house half an hour later, they found the place empty. Ordier fixed some cold drinks for them both.

He left Parren on the patio and went in search of the women.

A few moments later, he saw them in the rough ground behind the house,

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walking from the direction of the gate in the courtyard wall. He waited impatiently until they reached him.

"Where have you been?" he said to Jenessa.

"You were gone so long, I took Luovi to see your folly. The gate was unlocked, so we assumed it would be all right."

"You know it's not safe up there!" Ordier said.

"What an interesting building it is," Luovi said to him. "Such eccentric architecture. All those concealed faults in the walls. And what a view there is higher up!"

She smiled at him patronizingly, then shifted the strap of her large leather bag on her shoulder, and walked past him towards the house. Ordier looked at Jenessa, hoping for some instructive expression, but she wouldn't meet his eyes.

vii

Parren and his wife stayed at the house for the rest of the day. Ordier was a passive listener to most of the conversation, feeling excluded from it. He wished he could involve himself in Jenessa's work to the same degree that Luovi seemed to be involved with Parren, but whenever he ventured an opinion or an idea into the discussion of the Qataari, he was either ignored or tacitly dismissed. The result was that while Jacj Parren outlined his elaborate scheme — there was an aircraft to be hired, and a place found to erect the scintilla monitoring and decoding equipment — Ordier fell into an introspective mood and grew increasingly preoccupied with his secret one-sided relationship with the Qataari girl.

From the crest of the ridge it had been impossible to see whether there was a ritual taking place, and in any event the fact that they had been noticed would have put an immediate halt to it... but just the sight of the placid, colorful valley had been enough to remind him of the girl and the ambiguity of the part she took in the ritual.

And there was the uncertainty of what Jenessa and Luovi had seen or done while they were in the folly.

Guilt and curiosity, the conflicting motives of the voyeur, were rising in Ordier again.

Shortly before sunset, Parren suddenly announced that he had another appointment in the evening, and Jenessa offered to drive them back to Tumo Town. Ordier, uttering the platitudes of host to departing guests, saw this as a brief chance to satisfy his curiosity. He walked down with the others to Jenessa's car and watched as they drove away. The sun had already sunk behind the Tumoit Mountains, and the distant town was glittering with lights.

When the car was out of sight, Ordier hurried back to the house, collected his binoculars, and set off for the folly.

As Jenessa had said, the padlock on the gate was open; he must have forgotten to close it the last time he left the folly. As he went through, he made sure to lock it, as usual, on the inside.

Tumoit twilights are short, a combination of the latitude and the western mountain heights, and as Ordier went up the slope towards the folly wall, it was difficult to see his way.

Once inside the hidden cell, Ordier

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wasted no time and put his eyes directly to the slit. Beyond, the valley was dark under the evening sky. He could see no one about; the alarm that their intrusion had caused seemed to have passed, for those Qataari in the valley during the day were nowhere about. The rose plantation was deserted, and the flowers moved to and fro in the breeze.

Unaccountably relieved, Ordier returned to the house. He was washing up the plates and cups when Jenessa returned. She was looking excited and beautiful, and she kissed Ordier when she came in.

"I'm going to work with Jacj!" she said. "He wants me to advise him. Isn't that marvelous?"

"Advise him? How?"

"On the Qataari. He'll pay me... and he says that when he returns to the north I can go with him."

Ordier nodded and turned away.

"Aren't you pleased for me?"

"How much is he going to pay you?"

Jenessa had followed him as he walked out onto the patio, and from the open doorway she turned on the colored lights concealed amongst the grapevines hanging from the trellis overhead.

"Does it matter how much it is?"

Looking back at her, he saw how the lights laid subtle shades across the olive-colored skin of her face, like the reflection from sun on flower petals. "It's not the amount that matters," he said. "It's what you would have to do to earn it."

"Nothing more than I'm doing now. It will double my income, Yvann. You should be pleased! Now I can buy a house for myself."

"And what's this about going to the north with him? You know you can't leave the archipelago."

"Jacj has a way."

"He has a way with everything, hasn't he? I suppose his university can interpret the covenant to suit itself."

"Something like that. He hasn't told me."

Ordier turned away irritably, staring out at the still blue water of the pool. Jenessa went across to him.

"There isn't anything going on between us," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"You know, Yvann. It's not sex, or anything."

He laughed, suddenly and shortly. "Why on earth do you bring that into it?"

"You're behaving as if I'm having an affair with him, or something. It's just a job... just the work I've always done."

"I never said it wasn't."

"I know I've spent a lot of time with him and Luovi," Jenessa said. "I can't help it. It's, well...."

"The bloody Qataari. That's it, isn't it?"

"You know it is."

She took his arm then, and for several minutes they said nothing. Ordier was angry, and it took some time for his mood to subside. It was irrational of course; these things always were. Parren and his wife, since their arrival, had seemed set on changing the placid way of life he enjoyed, guilty conscience and all. The thought of Jenessa going over to them, collaborating with them, was just one more intrusion, and Ordier was incapable of dealing with it any way

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other than emotionally.

Later, when they had made some supper and were drinking wine together on the patio, enjoying the warm night, Jenessa said, "Jacj wants you to join his work too."

"Me?" Ordier had mellowed as the evening progressed, and his laugh this time was not sardonic. "There's not much I can do for him."

"He says there's a lot you can do. He wants to rent your folly."

"Whatever for?" Ordier said, taken by surprise.

"It overlooks the Qataari valley. Jacj wants to build an observation cell in the wall."

"Tell him it's not available," Ordier said abruptly. "It's structurally unsound."

Jenessa was regarding him with a thoughtful expression.

"It seemed safe enough to me," she said. "We climbed right up to the battlements today."

"I thought I told you —"

"What?"

"It doesn't matter," Ordier said, sensing another row. He raised the wine bottle to see how much was left. "Would you like another glass?"

Jenessa yawned, but she did it in an affected, exaggerated way, as if she too had seen the way the conversation had been going and welcomed the chance to let the subject die.

"I'm tired," she said. "Let's finish the bottle and go to bed."

"You'll stay the night then?"

"If I'm invited."

"You're invited," Ordier said.

viii

Four more days passed. Although Ordier stayed away from the cell in the folly wall, his curiosity about the Qataari girl continued. At the same time, though, he felt a growing sense of ambiguity, compounded by the unwelcome presence of Parren and his wife.

The morning after these two had visited his house, Ordier had been waiting for Jenessa to leave when a distracting notion struck him. It came from what Parren had said to him on the ridge, about the unmarked, unidentified scintillas. "They're connected with the Qataari," Parren had said, and took this to mean that someone was beating him at his own game.

Ordier, listening to Jenessa in the shower cubicle, suddenly saw the possibility of an altogether different interpretation.

It was not that someone else was spying on the Qataari... but that *the Qataari themselves* were watching.

With their obsessive desire for privacy, it would clearly be in their interest to watch the movements of the other people on Tumo. If they had access to scintilla equipment — or had been able to manufacture it themselves somehow — then it would be a logical way of defending themselves against the outside world.

It wasn't impossible. The Qataari men and women who had visited the civilized northern continent had revealed a brilliant deductive understanding of science and technology, and after a only a few moments of hesitation had been completely at home with such devices as elevators, telephones, automobiles... even computers. Parren had

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said that Qataari science was sophisticated, and if that were so, the Qataari might have learned how to duplicate the scintillas that had been poured so indiscriminately over their homeland.

If the Qataari were watching the people of Tumo, then they would certainly be watching Ordier; he remembered the unmarked scintillas he was always finding in his house.

Later that day, when Jenessa had left, Ordier had taken his detector and scoured every room of the house. He found another half dozen of the unmarked scintillas and put them with the others in the quiet-case... but the detector was fallible; one could never be entirely sure that every single scintilla had been found.

He had spent most of this day in thought, realizing that this conjecture, if it was true, led to the conclusion that the Qataari knew he was spying on them.

If *this* was so, then it would account for something that had always felt uncanny to him: his conviction that the ritual was staged for his benefit.

He had always maintained the most scrupulous efforts at silence and secrecy, and in any ordinary situation he had no reason to suppose that the Qataari knew he was there.

But the girl had become a central figure in the ritual *after* he had noticed her in the plantation and had watched her through his binoculars. The ritual itself invariably started *after* he went into the cell; he had never once found it in progress. And the ceremony, although staged in a circular arena, was always within his view, the girl was always facing *towards* him.

Until now Ordier had unconsciously attributed all this to simple good fortune and had not sought a rational explanation. But if the Qataari were watching him, were waiting for him, then this would explain it.

The major mystery remained, however: the famous dislike the Qataari had of being watched.

They would not allow someone to watch them, far less encourage it by mounting an intriguing ritual for his benefit.

It was this new understanding, and its attendant enigmas, that kept Ordier away from the folly for the four days. In the past he had supposed that the girl was being prepared for him, that she was a sexual lure, but this had been the stuff of erotic imaginings. To have to confront this as a matter of actual fact was something he was not ready for.

To do so would be to accept something that was once a part of his fantasies: that the girl knew who he was, that the Qataari had *selected* him.

So the days passed. Jenessa was busy with Parren's preparations, and she seemed not to notice Ordier's abstracted state of mind. He prowled the house by day, sorting through his books and trying to concentrate on domestic matters. By night he slept, as usual, with Jenessa, but during their love-making, especially in those moments just before reaching climax, Ordier's thoughts were of the Qataari girl. He imagined her sprawling across the bed of scarlet petals, her garment torn away... and her lips reaching to meet his, her eyes staring submissively at him, her body warm and soft to the touch.

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She had been offered to him, and Ordier knew that she was his for the taking.

ix

On the morning of the fifth day Ordier awoke to a new realization: the dilemma had resolved itself.

As he lay beside the sleeping Jenessa, he knew he accepted the fact that the Qataari had selected him, and he also knew why. He had met several Qataari in the north before he emigrated and had made no secret to them of his work. They must have identified him here; he had been selected because of the scintillas.

But more than this: until this waking Ordier had feared the idea, for it implied that he was a prisoner of the Qataari will... but this new understanding actually freed him.

There was no further reason for his obsessive curiosity. He need never again agonize over what advances there might have been in the ritualized ceremony, for the ritual would not take place *until he was there to observe it.*

He need never again return to the claustrophobic cell in the wall, for the Qataari would wait.

They would wait for his arrival, as they would wait for others' departure.

Lying in his bed, staring up at the mirrored ceiling, Ordier realized that the Qataari had liberated him. The girl was being offered to him, and he could accept or refuse according to his whim.

Then Jenessa, waking beside him, turned over and said, "What's the time?"

Ordier looked at the clock, told her the time.

"I've got to hurry this morning."

"What's the rush?"

"Jacj's catching the ferry to Muriseay. The aircraft will be ready today."

"Aircraft?"

"To scintillate the Qataari," Jenessa said. "We're intending to spray them tonight or tomorrow night."

Ordier nodded. He watched Jenessa as she rolled sleepily from the bed and walked naked to the shower cubicle. He followed her and waited outside, imagining her voluptuous body as he always did, but for once he was incapable of lustful thoughts. Afterwards he walked with her to the car, watched her drive away. He returned to the house.

Reminding himself of his new existential state, he made some coffee, then took it out onto the patio to drink. The weather was hot again, and the harsh scraping of the crickets seemed especially loud. A new crate of books had arrived the previous day, and the swimming pool looked clean and cold. He could make it a busy day, if he so decided.

He wondered if the Qataari were watching him now; if their scintillas lay between the paving stones, in the branches of the vines, in the soil of the overgrown flower beds.

"I'll never spy on the Qataari again," he said aloud, into the imagined aural pickups.

"I'll go to the folly today, and tomorrow, and every day," he said.

"I'll move from this house," he said. "I'll rent it to Parren, and I'll live with Jenessa in the town."

"I'll watch the Qataari," he said. "I'll watch them until I have seen everything, until I have taken everything."

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He left his cushioned recliner and roamed around the patio, gesturing and waving, adopting elaborate postures of deep thought, of sudden decision, of abrupt changes of mind. He played to the invisible audience, remonstrating with himself for his indecision, declaiming his freedom to act at will, declaring with mimed tears his independence and responsibility.

It was an act, but not an act, for free will liberates the purposeful and restrains the irresolute.

"Am I interrupting anything?"

The voice, breaking into his ridiculous charade, startled Ordier, and he turned round in anger and embarrassment. It was Luovi Parren, standing by the entrace to the lounge. Her large leather bag was slung as usual across her shoulder.

"The door was open," she said. "I hope you don't mind."

"What do you want?" It was impossible for Ordier to keep the incivility out of his voice.

"Well, after my long walk I'd appreciate something to drink."

"Have a coffee. I'll get another cup."

Furiously, Ordier went into the kitchen and found a cup. He stood by the sink, resting both hands on the edge and staring into the bowl in mindless rage. He hated being caught off-guard.

Luovi was sitting in the shade, on the steps that led from the veranda.

"I thought you'd be with Jacj," Ordier said, when he had poured her some coffee. He was still thrown by her unexpected arrival but had recovered sufficiently at least to make an effort towards politeness.

"I didn't want to see Muriseay again," Luovi said. "Is Jenessa here?"

"Isn't she with Jacj?" Ordier was distracted; he wanted his illusion of free will back again.

"I haven't seen her. Jacj left two days ago."

Ordier frowned, wondering what was going on. Jenessa had left the house only half an hour ago, to see the ferry leave; if Luoiv had walked from the town, they should have passed each other on the road. And didn't Jenessa say that Parren was catching the ferry this morning?

"Jacj has gone to charter an aircraft, I take it?"

"Of course not. The Qataari camp was scintillated three nights ago. Didn't you hear the engine?"

"No! Did Jenessa know this?"

"I'm sure she must," Luovi said and smiled the same sparse smile he had seen the day she came back from the folly.

"Then what's Jacj doing on Muriseay?"

"He's collecting the monitoring equipment. Do you mean Jenessa didn't tell you any of this?"

"Jenessa told me —"

Ordier hesitated, regarding Luovi suspiciously. Her manner was as sweetly polite as that of a suburban gossip breaking news of adultery. She sipped her coffee, apparently waiting for his reply. Ordier turned away, took a breath. It was a time for instant decision: to believe this woman or to believe the words and behavior of Jenessa, who, in the last few days, had done or said nothing that roused the least suspicion.

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As he turned back to face her, Luovi said, "You see, I was hoping I would find Jenessa here, so we could talk things over."

Ordier said, "I think you should go, Luovi. I don't know what you want, nor what you're trying to—"

"Then you do know more about the Qataari than you've said!"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"As far as I know, everything! Isn't that what the folly was built for in the first place?"

"The folly? What are you talking about?"

"Don't think we don't know, Ordier. It's time Jenessa was told."

Five days ago, Luovi's insinuations would have gone straight through Ordier's defenses to the guilty conscience he suffered; that was five days ago, though, and since then everything had become more complex. The guilt was still there, but now it was balanced by other drives.

"Look, get out of my house! You're not welcome here!"

"Very well." Luovi stood up and put down her cup with a precise motion. "You'll take the consequences then?"

She turned and walked back into the house. Ordier followed and saw her leave through the main door and walk down the broken terrain of the hillside towards the track. He was confused and angry, trying to impose some kind of pattern on what had just happened.

Did Luovi know as much as she seemed to be implying? Had she really come to the house to see Jenessa, or was it just to make a scene? Why? What could her motives conceivably have been? Why should she imply that Jenessa had been lying to him?

The sun was high, and white light glared down across the dusty countryside. In the distance, Tumo Town was shimmering in the haze.

Watching Luovi striding angrily through the heat, her heavy bag banging against her side, Ordier felt a sense of conventional courtesies come over him, and he took pity on her. He saw that she had apparently lost her way and was not heading directly towards the track but was moving across the hillside parallel to the ridge.

He ran after her.

"Luovi!" he called, as he caught up with her. "You can't walk all the way back in this heat. Let me drive you."

She glanced at him angrily and walked on. "I know *exactly* where I'm going, thank you."

She looked towards the ridge, and as Ordier fell back behind her, he was aware of the deliberate ambiguity.

x

Ordier marched into his house and slammed the door behind him. He went out to the patio and sat down on the cushions scattered across the sun-warmed paving stones. A bird fluttered away from where it had been perched on the grapevine, and Ordier glanced up. The veranda, the patio, the rooms of the house... they all had their undetected scintillas, making his home into a stage for an unseen audience. The uncertainties remained, and Luovi's brief, unwelcome visit had only added to them.

He was hot and breathless from running after the woman, and so he

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stripped off his clothes and swam for a few minutes in the pool.

Afterwards, he paced to and fro across the patio, trying to marshal his thoughts and replace ambiguity with certainty. He was unsuccessful.

The unmarked scintillas: he had almost convinced himself that they were being planted by the Qataari, but the possibility remained that they belonged to some other agency.

Jenessa: according to Luovi, she had deceived him, according to his instincts, she hadn't. (Ordier still trusted her, but Luovi had succeeded in placing a doubt in his mind.)

The trip to Muriseay: Parren had gone to Muriseay (today? — or two days ago?) to charter an aircraft or to collect the monitoring equipment. But, according to Luovi, the aircraft had already done its work; would this have been carried out before Parren had his decoding equipment ready?

Luovi: where was she now? Was she returning to the town, or was she somewhere along the ridge?

Jenessa, again: where was she now? Had she gone to the ferry, was she at her office, or was she returning to his house?

The folly: how much did Luovi know about his visits to the hidden cell? And what was all that about what the folly had been built for "in the first place?" Did she know more about it and its past than he did? Why *was* there an observation cell in the wall, with its clear view across the valley?

All these were the new doubts, the additional ones for which he had Luovi to thank; the others, the major ones, remained.

The Qataari: did he watch them, or did they watch him?

The Qataari girl: was he a free observer of her, hidden and unsuspected, or was he a chosen participant, playing a fundamental rôle in the progress of the mysterious ritual?

In his perplexity of free will and contradiction, Ordier knew that paradoxically it was the Qataari ritual and the girl that provided the only certainty.

He was convinced that if he went to the folly and placed his eyes to the crack in the wall, then for whatever reason or combination of reasons, the girl would be there waiting... and the ritual would recommence.

And he knew that the choice was his: he need never again climb up to the cell in the wall.

Without further thought, Ordier went into the house, found his binoculars, and started to climb up the slope of the ridge towards the folly. He went a short distance, then turned back, pretending to himself that he was exercising his freedom of choice. In fact, he was collecting his scintilla detector, and as soon as he had the instrument under his arm, he left the house again and climbed towards the courtyard gate.

He reached the bottom of the folly wall in a few minutes, then went quickly up the steps to his hidden cell. Before he went inside he put down the detector and used his binoculars to scan the countryside around his house. The track leading towards the town was deserted, and there was not even any dust drifting in the air to show that a car might have driven along it in the last few minutes. He searched along the parts of the ridge visible from here,

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looking for Luovi, but where he had last spoken to her was an area dotted with high, free-standing boulders, and he could see no sign of her.

In the distance, the town lay in the hot, pellucid air, seeming still and abandoned.

Ordier stepped back, squeezed between the two protecting slabs, and went through into the cell. At once he was assailed by the sickly, pungent fragrance of Qataari roses; it was a smell he associated with the girl, the valley, the ritual, and it seemed subtly illicit, sexually provocative.

He put his binoculars onto a shelf and opened up the scintilla detector. He paused before switching it on, frightened of what he might find. If there were scintillas here, inside the cell, then he would know beyond any doubt that the Qataari had been observing him.

He pulled the antenna to its full height and threw the switch... and at once the loudspeaker gave out a deafening electronic signal that faded instantaneously to silence. Ordier, whose hand had leaped back reflexively from the device, touched the directional antenna and shook the instrument, but no further sound came from it. He turned off the switch, wondering what was wrong.

He took the detector into the sunlight and turned on the switch again. In addition to the audible signal there were several graded dials on the side which registered the presence and distance of detected scintillas, but these all stayed at zero. The speaker remained silent. Ordier shook the instrument, but the circuits stayed dead. He let out a noisy breath in exasperation, knowing that the detector had worked perfectly the last time he used it.

When he checked the batteries, Ordier found that they were dead.

He cursed himself for forgetting and put the detector on the steps. It was useless, and another uncertainty had appeared. Was his cell seeded with scintillas, or wasn't it? That sudden burst of electronic noise: was it the dying gasp of the batteries, or had the instrument actually been registering the presence of scintillas in the last microsecond of the batteries' power?

He returned to the claustrophobic cell and picked up his binoculars. Qataari rose petals lay thickly on the slab where he normally stood, and as he stepped forward to the crack in the wall, Ordier saw that more petals lay there, piled so thickly that the aperture was all but blocked. Not caring whether they fell back into his cell or out into the valley, Ordier brushed them away and shuffled his feet to kick them from the slab. The fragrance rose around him like pollen, and as he breathed it he felt a heady sensation: arousal, excitement, drunkenness.

He tried to remember the first time he had found petals here in the cell. There had been a strong, gusting wind; they could have blown in through the slit by chance. But last night? Had there been a wind? He couldn't remember.

Ordier shook his head, trying to think clearly. There had been all the confusions of the morning, then Luovi. The dead batteries. The perfumed petals.

It seemed, in the suffocating dark-

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ness of the cell, that events were being contrived by greater powers to confuse and disorientate him.

If those powers existed, he knew whose they were.

As if it were a light seen wanly through a mist, Ordier focused on the knowledge and blundered mentally towards it.

The Qataari had been watching him all along. He had been selected, he had been placed in this cell, he had been meant to watch. Every movement in this cell, every indrawn breath and every muttered word, every voyeuristic intent and response and even thought... they had all been monitored by the Qataari. They were decoded and analyzed and tested against their actions, and the Qataari behaved according to their interpretation.

He had become a scintilla to the Qataari.

Ordier gripped a piece of rock jutting out from the wall and tried to steady himself. He could feel himself swaying, as if his thoughts were a palpable force that could dislodge him from the cell. It was madness.

That first day he had found the cell, the very beginning. He had been *concealed,* and the Qataari had been *unaware* of him. He had watched the Qataari, the realization of the nature of his stolen privilege growing in him only slowly. He had watched the girl moving through the rose bushes, plucking the flowers and tossing them into the pannier on her back. She had been one among dozens of others. He had said nothing, except with his thoughts, and the Qataari had not noticed.

The rest was chance and coincidence... it had to be.

Reassured, Ordier leaned forward and pressed his forehead against the slab of rock above the slit. He looked downwards, into the circular arena below.

xi

It was as if nothing had changed. The Qataari were waiting for him.

The girl lay back on the carpet of rose petals, the red toga loose and revealing across her body. She was staring upwards at Ordier, and she was quite motionless. The man who had kicked her was standing back, looking down at her with his shoulders hunched and stroking himself at the top of his legs. The others stood around: the two women who had thrown the petals and bared their bodies and the men who had been chanting. Now they stood in a silent circle, watching and waiting.

The restoration of the tableau was so perfect, as if the image of his dreams and memory had been photographed and reconstructed so no detail should be omitted, that Ordier felt a shadow of the guilt that had followed his spontaneous ejaculation.

He raised his binoculars and looked at the girl's face. Her eyes, although half-closed, were looking directly at him. Her expression too was identical; it was as if he was seeing the next frame of a film being inched through a projector gate. Fighting the feeling of associative guilt, Ordier stared down at the girl, meeting her gaze, marveling at her beauty and the sensual abandonment in her face.

He felt a tightness in his crotch, a new tumescence.

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The girl moved, shaking her head from side to side, and at once the ritual continued from where it had halted.

Four of the men stepped forward from the circle, picking up long ropes that had been coiled at the base of four of the statues. As they moved towards the girl, the men unraveled the ropes, and Ordier saw that the other ends were tied around the bases of the statues. At the same time, the two women found their panniers of rose petals and came forward with them. The others began a chant.

In the rose plantation beyond, the Qataari were moving about their tasks, tending and picking and watering. Ordier was suddenly aware of them, as if they too had been waiting, as if they too were a part of the ritual.

The girl was being tied by her wrists and ankles, the ropes knotted tightly and roughly around her limbs. She made no apparent struggle against this but continued to writhe in the petals in the way she had done from the start, and as her arms and legs were tied, her movements changed to a circling of her pelvic girdle, a slow rotation of her head from side to side. The garment was working loose from her body; for an instant Ordier saw a small breast revealed, the nipple almost as pink as the petals that were being thrown across her, but one of the men with the ropes moved across her as he tied the knot, and when he stepped back her body was covered again.

Through all this — the tying of the ropes, the throwing of the petals — the solitary man stood before her, working his hand across his genitals, waiting and watching.

When the last rope was tied the men withdrew, and as they did so the chanting came to a sudden end. All the men, bar the one central to the ritual, walked away from the arena, towards the plantation, towards the distant Qataari camp.

The women showered petals, the man stood erect, the spread-eagled girl writhed helplessly in the hold of the ropes. The flowers were drifting down across her like snow, and soon only her face was uncovered. As the girl pulled against the ropes, Ordier could see the petals heaving as she struggled beneath them, could see the ropes flexing and jerking.

At last her struggles ceased, and she stared upwards again. Looking at her through the binoculars, Ordier saw that in spite of the violence of her struggles, the girl's face was at ease and her eyes were wide open. Saliva brightened her cheeks and jaw, and her face had a healthy, ruddy flush to it, as if reflecting the color of the flowers. Beneath the petals, her chest was rising and falling quickly, as if she were breathless.

Once more she was seeming to look directly back at Ordier, her expression knowing and seductive.

The stilling of her body signaled the next development, as if the victim of the ritual was also its director, because no sooner was she staring lasciviously upwards than the man who stood before her bent down. He reached into the heap of petals and took a hold on another of the red panels of the girl's toga. He tore it away, throwing into the air a cloud of swirling petals. Ordier, looking down, thought he saw a glimpse of the girl's body revealed be-

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neath, but the petals drifted too densely above her, and the women were throwing more, covering the nakedness so briefly revealed. Another piece of the dress was torn away; more petals flew. Then another piece of fabric, and another. The last one came away with difficulty; this was the piece beneath the girl, and as the man snatched it away, the girl's body bucked against the constraint of the ropes, and bare knees and arms, a naked shoulder, heaved momentarily from the mound of petals.

The garment lay discarded on the floor of the arena, and Ordier knew that beneath the petals the girl was naked. He watched as more and more of the petals were poured on top of her, completely covering her; the women no longer threw the petals with their hands, but up-ended their panniers, and let the scarlet flowers fall on her like liquid. As the petals fell, the man knelt beside the girl and shaped and smoothed them over her with his hands. He patted them down over her body, heaped them over her arms and legs, pushed them into her nose and mouth.

Soon it was finished. It seemed to Ordier, from his position above, that the girl lay beneath and at the center of a smooth lake of petals, laid so that no hint of the shape of her body was revealed. Only her eyes were uncovered.

The man and the two women stepped out of the arena and walked away, heading for the distant camp.

Ordier lowered his binoculars and saw that all through the rose plantation the work had stopped. The Qataari were leaving the valley, returning to their homes behind the dark canvas screens of the encampment and leaving the girl alone in the arena.

Ordier looked down at her again, using his binoculars. She was staring back at him, and the invitation was explicit. All he could see of her were her eyes, placid and alert and yearning, watching him through the crack the man had left in the covering of roses.

There was a darkening around her eyes, like the shadows left by grief. As her steady gaze challenged and beckoned him, Ordier, partially drugged by the narcotic fragrance of the roses, saw a familiarity in the girl's eyes that froze all sense of mystery. That bruising of the skin, that confident stare.....

Ordier gazed back at her for several minutes, and the longer he looked the more convinced he became that he was staring into the eyes of Jenessa.

xii

Befuddled by the roses, sexually aroused by their fragrance, Ordier fell back from the slit in the wall and lurched outside. The brilliance of the sunlight, the heat of its rays, took him by surprise, and he staggered on the narrow steps. He regained his balance by resting one hand against the main wall of the folly, then went past his discarded detector and began to walk down the steps towards the ground.

Halfway down was another narrow ledge, running across the wall as far as the end of the folly, and Ordier walked precariously along this, obsessed with the urgency of his needs. At the end of the ledge he was able to climb down to the top of the wall which surrounded the folly's courtyard, and once on top of this he could see the rocks and broken

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boulders of the ridge a short distance below.

He jumped, landing heavily across the face of a boulder. He grazed a hand and took a knock on one knee, but apart from being slightly winded from the shock he was unhurt. He crouched for a few seconds, recovering.

A stiff breeze was blowing through the valley and along the ridge, and as Ordier's breathing steadied he felt his head beginning to clear. At the same time, with an indefinable sense of regret, he felt his arousal dying too.

A moment of the free will he had accorded himself that morning had returned. No longer driven by the enigmatic stimulations of the Qataari ritual, Ordier realized that it was now in his power to abandon the quest. He could scramble somehow down the broken slabs of the ridge and return to his house. He could see Jenessa, who might be there and wondering where he was. He could seek out Luovi and apologize to her and try to find an explanation for Jacj's apparent or actual movements. He could resume the life he had led until this summer, before the day he had found the cell. He could forget the Qataari girl, and all that she meant to him, and never return to the folly.

So he crouched on the side of the boulder, trying to be clear in his mind.

But there was something he could not resolve by walking away from it. It was the certain knowledge that the *next time* he looked through the crack in the folly wall — whether it was tomorrow, or in a year's time, or in half a century's time — he would see a bed of Qataari rose petals, and staring back at him would be the bruised eyes of a lovely girl, waiting for him and reminding him of Jenessa.

xiii

Ordier climbed clumsily down the last overhanging boulder, fell to the scree beneath, and skidded down in a cloud of dust and grit to the sandy floor of the valley.

He stood up, and the gaunt height of the folly loomed beside and above him.

He knew there was no one about, because as he had been climbing down the rocks, he had had a perfect view to all sides. There were no guards visible anywhere along the ridge, no other Qataari anywhere. The breeze blew through the deserted rose plantation, and far away, on the other side of the valley, the screens around the camp hung heavy and grey.

The encircling statues of the arena lay ahead of him, and Ordier walked slowly towards them, excited again and apprehensive. As he approached he could see the mound of petals and could smell the heady perfume from them. Here in the shadow of the folly the breeze had little effect and barely stirred the surface of the mound. Now he was at ground level, he saw that the petals had not been smoothed to a flat surface, but that they lay irregularly and deeply.

Ordier hesitated when he came to the nearest of the statues. It was, by chance, one of those to which the ropes had been tied, and he saw the rough-fibered rope stretching tautly across to the mound of petals, vanishing into it.

Another reason for his hesitation was a sudden self-awareness, a need for

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guidance. If he had interpreted the actions of the Qataari correctly, he had been tacitly invited to relinquish his hiding place and to enter the ritual. But what was expected of him now?

Should he walk across to the girl in the petals and introduce himself? Should he stand before her as the man had done? Should he rape her? Should he untie her? He looked around again, helplessly, hoping for some clue as to what to do.

All those possibilities were open to him, and more, but he was also aware again of the way his freedom was created by the actions of others. He was free to act as he wished, and yet whatever he did would have been preordained by the mysterious, all-knowing power of the Qataari. He was free to go, but if he did, it would have been determined that this would be his choice; he was free to throw aside the petals and ravish the girl, for that too had been predetermined.

So he stood uncertainly by the statue, breathing the dangerous sweetness of the roses, feeling again the rise of sexual intrigue. At last he stepped forward, but some residual trace of convention made him clear his throat nervously, signaling his presence. There was no reaction from the girl.

He followed the rope and stood by the edge of the mound of petals where it became buried. He craned forward, trying to see the place where the aperture for the girl's eyes had been left... but the mound was irregular, and he could see nothing. The fragrance of the petals lay heavy; his presence stirred it up like flocculent sediment shaken from the bottom of a bottle of liquid. He breathed it deeply, embracing the dullness of thought it induced, welcoming the further surrender to the mysteries of the Qataari. It relaxed him and aroused him, made him sensitive to the sounds of the breeze, to the dry heat of the sun.

His clothes were stiff and unnatural on him, and so he took them off. He saw the pile of scarlet material where the girl's torn toga had been tossed aside, and he threw his own clothes on top. When he turned back to the pile of petals, he crouched down and took hold of the rope; he pulled on it, feeling the tautness, knowing that as he moved it the girl would feel it.

He stepped forward and the petals stirred around his ankles; the scent thickened, like the vaginal musk of desire.

But then he hesitated again, suddenly aware of an intrusive sensation, so intense that it was almost akin to a pressure on his skin.

Somewhere, somebody hidden was watching him.

xiv

The realization was so profound that it penetrated the pleasant delirium induced by the rose perfume, and Ordier stepped back again. He turned around, staring first at the wall of the folly behind him, then across at the nearby plantation of roses.

It seemed to him that there was a movement somewhere in the bushes, and, distracted from the girl, Ordier walked slowly towards them. They seemed to be encroaching upon him, so near were they. They grew to an unnatural height; like small trees, they were

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nearly all taller than he. Convinced that someone was standing concealed behind the plants, Ordier ran towards where he thought he had seen the movement and plunged into the nearest row of bushes. At once he was halted; the thorns of the branches snagged and tore at his skin, bringing spots and streaks of blood to his chest and arms.

Here, in the plantation itself, the thick smell of the roses was so concentrated that it felt as if the air itself had been replaced by the sweetness of scent. He couldn't think, couldn't focus his mind. Was there anyone beyond, hiding in the roses, or had he imagined it? Ordier peered forward and to each side but was unable to see.

In the distance, just visible across the top of the plantation, were the screens around the Qataari camp.

Ordier turned away. He stumbled back through the prickly branches of the roses and walked towards the arena.

The statues faced inwards, staring down at the girl buried beneath the petals.

A memory, surfacing sluggishly like water-logged timber through the muddy pool of his mind: the statues, the statues. Earlier in the ritual... why were they there? He remembered, dimly, the men gathered around the girl, the cleaning and polishing of the statues. And later...?

As the girl walked into the center of the arena, some of the men... climbed into the hollow statues!

The ritual had not changed. When he returned to his hidden cell that morning, the Qataari had been positioned exactly as he had last seen them. But he had forgotten the men inside the statues! Were they still there?

Ordier stood before the one nearest to him and stared up at it.

It depicted a man of great physical strength and beauty, holding in one hand a scroll and in the other a long spear with a phallic head. Although the figure was nude from the waist up, its legs were invisible because of a voluminous, loose-fitting garment, shaped brilliantly in the metal of the statue. The face looked downwards, directly at him and beyond, to where the girl lay inside the petals.

The eyes....

There were no eyes. Just two holes, behind which it would be possible for human eyes to hide.

Ordier stared up, looking at the dark recesses behind the eye holes, trying to see if anyone was there. The statue gazed back, vacantly, implacably.

Ordier turned away towards the pile of rose petals, knowing the girl still lay there a few paces away from him. But beyond the petals were other statues, staring down with the same sinister emptiness. Ordier fancied he saw a movement: behind the eyes of one, a head ducking down.

He stumbled across the arena, tripping on one of the ropes (the petals of the mound rustled and shifted; had he tugged at the girl's arm?), and lurched up to the suspect statue. He felt his way round to the other side, groping for some kind of handle which would open the hinged back. His fingers closed on a knob shaped like a raised disk, and he pulled at it. The hinges squeaked, the back came open, and Ordier, who had

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fallen on his knees, looked inside.

The statue was empty.

He opened the others, all of them, all around the circle... but each one was empty. He kicked his naked foot against them, he hammered with his fists and slammed the metal doors, and all the statues rang with a hollow reverberation.

The girl was still there, bound and silent beneath the petals, listening to his noisy and increasingly desperate searches, and Ordier was growing steadily more aware of her mute, uncritical presence. She was waiting for him in the manner of her people, and she was prepared. He returned to the mound in the center of the arena, satisfied, as far as it was possible for him to be satisfied in this state of narcosis, that he had done all he could. But as he stood before the rose petals, breathing the sickly fragrance, he could still feel the pressure of eyes as distinctly as if it were the touch of a hand on his face.

XV

A dim understanding was growing in him. He had always felt an unvoiced need to resist the fragrance of the flowers, dreading what it might do to him, but now Ordier saw that he had to succumb. He gulped in the air and the perfume it carried, holding it in his lungs and feeling his skin tingle, his senses dull. He was aware of the girl, of her presence and her sexuality; the bruised eyes, the frail body, her innocence, his excitement. He kneeled down, reached forward with his hands, searched for her in the petals. The scent was suffocating.

He moved forward on his knees, wading through. The petals swirled about his sides and his elbows like a light, foamy liquid, scarlet-colored, desire-perfumed. He came to one of the ropes buried beneath the petals and followed it with his hands towards the center. He was near the girl now, near one of her limbs... and he waded forward hurriedly.

There was a deep indentation in the ground beneath him; Ordier, leaning forward to put his weight on one hand, fell instead and pitched forwards into the soft, warm depths of the mound. He shouted as he fell, and several of the petals entered his mouth. He reared up like a nonswimmer who falls in shallow water, showering flowers around him in a pink and scarlet spray, trying to spit the petals from his mouth.

He felt grit between his teeth, and he reached in with a finger and wiped it around. Several petals clung moistly to his hand. He raised it to look more closely at them, and Ordier saw a sudden glint of reflected light.

He sank down again onto his knees and picked up one of the petals at random. He held it before his eyes, squinting at it. There was a tiny gleam of light there too, a glittering, shimmering fragment of metal and glass.

Ordier picked up a handful of the petals, felt and saw the same glistening presence on every one. He let them fall, and as they flickered down, the sun reflected minutely from the scintillas embedded in the petals.

It was Ordier's last conscious recognition; the scent of the petals was overpowering him. He staggered forward on his knees, the petals rippling around his waist. Once again he reached the

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depression in the ground beneath the petals, and he fell forward into the flowers, reaching out for the body of the girl. He was in an ecstasy of delirium and desire.

He floundered and beat his arms, threw up the petals, kicked and struggled against the suffocating weight of the flowers, seeking the girl.

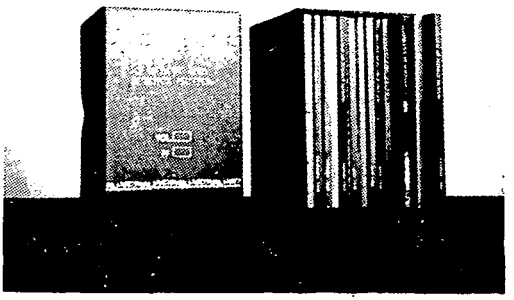
But the four ropes met in the center of the arena, and where the girl had been bound, there was now a large and tightly drawn knot.

Exhausted, Ordier fell on his back in the petals and let the sun play down on him. He could feel the hard lump of the knotted rope between his shoulder blades. The metal heads of the encircling statues loomed over him; the sky was brilliant and blue. He reached behind him to grasp the ropes above his head and spread his legs along the others.

The wind was rising and petals were blowing, drifting across him, covering his limbs.

Behind the statues, dominating the arena, was the bulk of the folly. The sun's light played full upon it, and the granite slabs were white and smoothly faced. In only one place was the perfection of the wall broken; in the center and about halfway up was a narrow slit of darkness. Ordier stared up at it, seeing behind it two identical glimmers of reflected light. They were circular and cold, like the lenses of binoculars.

The petals blew across him, covering him, and soon only his eyes were still exposed.



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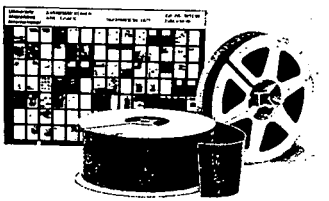

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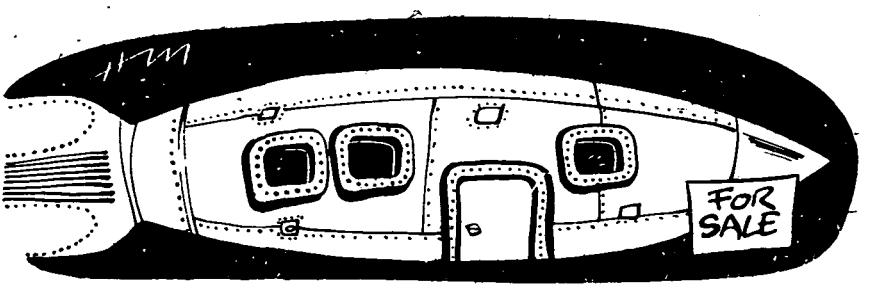

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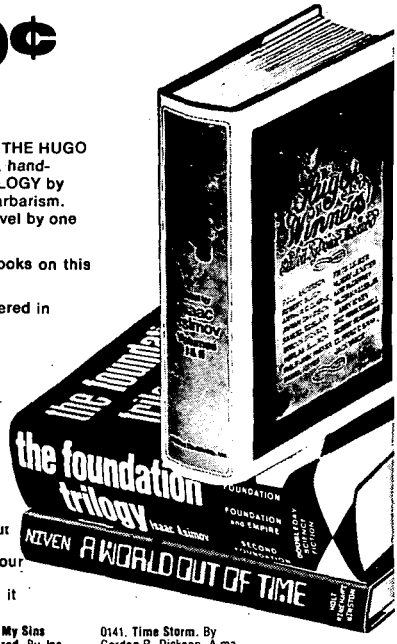

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